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## Up From Poverty: A Narrative Non-Fiction Study of Three Female Superintendents from Poverty

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**UP FROM POVERTY: A NARRATIVE NON-FICTION STUDY OF THREE  
FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS FROM POVERTY**

by

Stephanie L. Johnson B.S., M. Ed.

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Stephen F. Austin State University  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

For the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY  
(May 2017)

**UP FROM POVERTY: A NARRATIVE NON-FICTION STUDY OF  
THREE FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS FROM TEXAS**

by

Stephanie L. Johnson

APPROVED:

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Pauline M. Sampson, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair

---

Patrick M. Jenlink, Ed.D., Committee Member

---

Kerry L. Roberts, Ph.D., Committee Member

---

Elizabeth Vaughan, Ph.D., Chair, Department of  
Secondary Education and Educational Leadership

---

Richard Berry, DMA  
Dean of the Graduate School

## **ABSTRACT**

This narrative non-fiction study was designed to investigate the lived experiences of three female superintendents in the state of Texas who have lived in poverty during their youth and early life. The participating female superintendents were contacted by this researcher through email. The information used in this study was collected from participating superintendents through interviews and analyzed to find the common themes that exist between the lived experiences of each female superintendent from poverty as she progressed through the stages of development in life. The information was also analyzed to ascertain how she was able to elevate out of poverty to become the leader of a high poverty district and how she is able to use her lived experiences to help students who live in poverty.

The study indicated that many of the female superintendents from poverty were able to elevate out of poverty by using their religion, relying on the positive influences of key people in their lives and by improving themselves through education and school experiences.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would first like to thank God for my life, health and strength. He helped me to imagine, set and accomplish my goals and for this I am completely and totally grateful. I would like to dedicate my work to my father, the late Reverend John Q. Punch, who instilled in me his unwavering belief in God and the belief that I can accomplish anything in life. To my mother, Bernice M. Punch, thank you for all the hard work you put into me to make me who I am today! Thank you! To the best husband in the world, Johnnathan D. Johnson. I thank you so much for your love and patience during this process. To my children, Jalla and Jayson, I love you. Always see life for yourself. To my sisters and their families, thank you for the encouragement. You have always been there when I needed you the most! To my professors, Dr. Pauline Sampson, Dr. Patrick Jenlink and Dr. Kerry Roberts, thank you for everything!

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction to the study**

As Glass (2000) reported, the United States Census Bureau identified the position of superintendent as the most male dominated position of any profession. Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich (2000) revealed that male educators are forty times more likely to move from the classroom to leadership roles than female educators. The first female to occupy the position of public school superintendent dates back to 1883 when Carrie Chapman Catt took the office. Throughout history, females have dominated the classrooms (Bjork, 2000) but did not ascend to the leadership roles at a steady pace. Females occupying the superintendent role reached its highest point at 13.2% (Bjork, 2000; Glass, 1992) in 1999. Today, female superintendents are on the rise but as Wallace (2015) acknowledged, female superintendents are grossly underrepresented. This study explored the intersectionality of gender, socio-economic status and career choice of the female superintendent to ascertain how she was able to rise above the negative effects of poverty to lead a district with a majority of students living in poverty.

The United States Census Bureau (2014) reported that 24.6% of children in Texas live in poverty. These students arrive at schools daily needing help with the many difficult aspects of their lives. Poverty students were shown to suffer physically,

academically and socially (Gershoff, 2003) but many can experience success (O'Conner, 2002). This study focused on three female superintendents from poverty and how they were able to elevate out of poverty to go on to become successful leaders in their school districts and help students living in poverty.

Chapter I opens with the background of the problem, and the problem statement, followed by the purpose statement and research questions. Next, specific conceptual definitions are presented to inform the reader of terms relevant to the study. Following is the significance of the research, assumptions, limitations of the study, and the summary and organization of the study.

### **Background of the Problem**

Given the high child poverty rate in the United States, Jones, Bailey, and Partee (2016) acknowledged that its devastating impact has been well documented. The United States Census Bureau (2014) reported there were 4.2 million children under the age of 12, who live in poverty. At this age, children cannot provide for themselves. They rely on their parents, and guardians for all their needs. When children develop, Kail (2007) pointed to the schools and parents who have responsibility for teaching children self-control that make them effective citizens. Marquis-Hobbs (2014) explained that poverty impacts children directly, immediately and impedes their ability to focus, comprehend and retain information. Kail (2007) elaborated that Sigmund Freud explained that a child's experiences seemed to account for patterns of behavior in adulthood. If this is true, then many of the people who are born into poverty and remain in poverty should end life in poverty. Payne (2005) pointed out that children who observe how role models

deal with adverse situations and social interactions provide them with emotional resources. This study explored the effects of poverty on the child, the teen and the woman and her rise out of poverty to leadership.

Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, and Smith (1998) commented that many students who live in poverty have a less than enjoyable life. Payne (2005) expressed that education is the key to getting out and staying out of generational poverty. Pierson (2013) proclaimed that the student in poverty needs an advocate who knows and understands what it means to be from poverty. She emphasized that every child deserves a champion.

The superintendent of schools, as Sampson and Davenport (2010) and Katz (2005) remarked, is the highest-ranking administrator to lead change. The superintendent of schools is the leader who is in charge of raising student performance for all children (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012). The superintendent can provide the resources that are needed by the student to be successful because he or she was what Thomas (2002) classified as a bridge between the school and the community. The superintendent of schools can partner with other school leaders, as McCann, Jones, and Aronoff (2012) explained, to focus on improving the quality of teaching.

Wallace (2015) reported that 76% of teachers are female, who have been identified by Mokaba-Bernardo (2016) to possess attributes like motivation, ability to form quality relationships with students and their ability to differentiate instruction. Out of the 76% of the female teacher pool, only 23% of the public school superintendents were identified as female (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). With so many teachers

who are female and possess such extensive experience in teaching students, the question is why are there so few female school superintendents? Wallace (2015) identified that many females were qualified and reported that 40% of administrative positions at central offices were held by females. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) expressed that the discrepancy between the number of qualified female candidates and the number of chosen candidates was because of stereotypical expectations and beliefs.

Existing stereotypes, as pointed out by Kelsey, Allen, Coke and Ballard (2014) stated that successful leaders must possess masculine behaviors of authority and discipline which Eagly and Carli (2007) expressed as unfeminine. Women were considered, traditionally, to be the ‘keeper of the home’ and unable to discipline disruptive students (Blount, 1998). Another stereotype, as Glass (2000) reported, while men were trained and conditioned to aspire to be leaders, women chose to spend their free time with their families. While female superintendents, unlike their male counterparts, had to juggle job responsibilities and family life, many succeeded in doing both.

Female superintendents possess characteristics of cooperation, collaboration, caring, emotional, empathy, and maternal instincts (Mokaba-Bernardo, 2016). Because many of the students from poverty were from a female led household (Payne, 1996), they may have had experiences of watching their mothers raise a family and deal with a career, just as the female superintendent from poverty experiences (Hickman, 2015). Hickman (2015) maintained that the experience of watching a strong female at home played a role in how participants saw women in the workplace.

Singer (2015) reported that the idea of public schools was first established in the 1600s after parents realized that teaching their children to just read and write was insufficient. Today, education is free and open to all students regardless of parental ability to pay. The United States Census Bureau (2014) identified that 46.7 million people or 14.8% of the population in the USA lived in poverty. This included 15.5 million children that live in the wealthiest nation in the world. In Texas, 24.6% of all children live in poverty. Texas ranked 39<sup>th</sup> among other states in the overall population living in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2014).

Miranda (1991) contended that regardless of ethnicity, poor children were more likely to suffer developmental delay and damage. Taylor (2005) added that students of poverty were likely to underachieve and remain “at-risk” of dropping out of school. In turn, perpetuating the pull of poverty on the next generation. With this in mind, Jones et al. (2016) qualified that it is important to raise teacher awareness to the plight that students who live in poverty face daily. Jensen (2009) stated that schools could succeed in winning the war against poverty by combining formal and informal strategies to influence reliable relationships, strengthen peer socialization, and enhance the quest for importance and social status.

### **Stating the Problem**

The problem addressed by this study was superintendents who did grow up in poverty had the first-hand personal experience necessary to understand the negative influence of poverty on students. More specifically, the female superintendent that did grow up in poverty and has been successful in elevating her professional career from

teacher to superintendent is a rare phenomenon that is little understood. The problem of understanding the “life of poverty” that children experience is far removed from the life experiences of most superintendents. A “life of poverty” as child could serve as basis for understanding the lived experiences of female superintendents and the leadership practices necessary to leading a school district with levels of poverty represented in its student population and families.

Hair, Hanson, Wolfe and Pollak (2015) confirmed that students living in poverty were in the majority in the public school system today. Schools superintendents were forced to adapt their practices (Louis, Leithwood, Walstrom, & Anderson, 2010) to meet the needs of all students, including students living in poverty. Women superintendents from poverty hold first-hand knowledge and have experienced most, if not all of the situations that plague her students that are currently living in poverty. This study sought to explore the lived experiences of three female superintendents from poverty and how they successfully elevated out to become the leader of high poverty school districts and the champion of children from poverty.

Historically, the position of superintendent of schools has generally been held by men even though more women, as projected by Grogan & Shakeshaft (2011) are advancing to the top spot at a rate of .7% per year. At this rate, it will take 77 years before gender equality is enjoyed at this position. As Smith (2014) stated, women played a vital role in the leadership position despite being under represented and outnumbered by their male counterparts. This study illuminated women who have grown up in poverty

and their relationship with those who influenced them, as they became women superintendents.

Several studies such as Lang & Lingnau (2015) were conducted on the effects of poverty on the student. Studies, such as Sampson et al. (2010) were also conducted on the lack of gender equality in the office of a public school superintendent. Very few studies such as Murray and Malmgren (2005) focused on the effects of quality relationships on the students in poverty and their quest to move out of poverty. More research is indeed needed to aid more students, male and female out of the bonds of poverty. The researcher chose the setting of this research to be within the state of Texas. The researcher was familiar with the setting and context of this research being that she is from the state and grew up in poverty.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences and leadership practices of female superintendents that came from a life of poverty to understand how they were able to overcome a life in poverty to address the needs of students who live in poverty within boundaries of their school district. Researching female superintendents whose childhood started within the bounds of poverty, this researcher sought to critically analyze how the superintendents' childhood experiences in poverty affected their current leadership practices, views and how they have changed over the years. The research question guiding this study was:

1. After transitioning through the stages of life, what are the lived experiences of female superintendents from poverty that enabled them to elevate out of poverty to lead a district with a majority of students living in poverty?

## **Definitions**

To provide clarity and continuity and ensure purpose and importance of this narrative non-fiction study, the researcher defined the following conceptual terms that were instrumental to the study and the researcher's examination of female superintendents that came out of poverty. In providing the definitions for the following terms, the researcher sought to clarify and avoid any misconceptions of meanings of each word.

### **Intersectionality.**

Intersectionality is a feminist theory, a methodology for research, and a springboard for a social justice action agenda which explains the lives that people live that are multilayered derived from social relations and history (Association for Women's Right and Development, 2004). Hankivsky (2016) defined intersectionality as the promotion of understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations such as gender and poverty.

### **Poverty.**

Poverty is the state or condition of having little or no money, goods, or means of support; condition of being poor (Payne, 2005). Poverty is defined by thresholds set by the U.S. Census Bureau (2014) based on the family's annual income before taxes of \$24,036 for a family of four. Poverty is not defined at Texas Education Agency (TEA)

specifically by definition but is addressed through the collection of data on economically disadvantaged students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, (Weirich, 2016).

### **At-risk youths.**

At-risk youths are students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically, dropping out of school or have high risk factors for poor outcomes (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore & Carrano, 2006). Anderson Moore (2006) defined “at-risk” students as being at-risk of dropping out school through state defined criteria.

### **Generational poverty.**

Generational poverty is being in poverty for generations while working menial wage jobs and migrant work (Beegle, 2003). Denney (2012) identified generational poverty as passage of culture of poverty from parent to child.

### **Situational poverty.**

Situational poverty is poverty that has been caused by a temporary situation such as loss (Ng & Rury, 2006) of the breadwinner in the household. Denney (2012) explained that situational poverty can be caused when a family member experiences a catastrophic event such as loss of job or sickness.

## **Significance of the Research**

Many studies were conducted with the focus squarely on poverty such as Davis (2005); Golden (2016); and Valentine (2008) and many more have focused on female superintendents such as Garrett-Staib and Burkman (2015) and Hickman (2015). Very few studies focused specifically on the female superintendent from poverty. Only one

study was identified that focused on the female superintendent from poverty, Smith (2014). It is evident that a need exists to produce more research to shed light upon the menial level of female representation in the superintendent role (Blount, 1998). This study identified three female superintendents from poverty who defied convention and ascended to the top position to lead their school districts. This body of work adds to current literature that explores the lived experiences of the female superintendents' rise to the top position from a start in poverty and how they are able to use those lived experiences to help students in their district who currently live in poverty.

The narrative non-fiction research design allowed this researcher to bring the female superintendents' stories to life. The researcher sought to critically analyze the life stories of these women to compare and contrast their experiences in hope of finding common threads. Shields (2012) declared that society often points to the successful members and suggests that because they were able to achieve success, others like them will also find success. There are differences in every situation but this study sought to show that when a student was given the keys to change by a respected and accepted mentor, enough change happened that impacted their adult life.

### **Assumptions**

In this body of work, there were many assumptions held by the researcher. The assumptions posited by the researcher at the beginning of the study included the following.

1. Women superintendents who grew up in poverty and were participants in the study would be truthful when sharing their life stories to the best of their abilities.

2. Poverty still has some effects on the lives of female educators and leaders, specifically women superintendents as working professionals.
3. There are common threads that shared by all women who have grown up in poverty.
4. Women who grew up in poverty know and understand the plight of their students who are currently living in poverty.
5. Women superintendents selected for the study would participate and make themselves available to the researcher either in face-to-face, phone or text communication throughout this study.
6. The participants in this study had not participated in a prior dissertation study concerning female superintendents from poverty.

### **Limitations of the study**

Many limitations exist within a qualitative study. Wiersma (2000) pointed out that because qualitative studies occur in a natural setting, it could be extremely difficult to replicate. The first limitation was access to subjects. The time frame of the start of this study coincides with the start of the school year where many of the superintendents of school are faced with gearing up their districts to start a new year. The next limitation had to do with the female superintendent herself. Polkinghorne (2005) expressed that a participant's ability to reflectively discern aspects of their own experiences and then communicate them effectively provided another limitation to the study. The final limitation in this study was the sample size of participants that were available. With the limited number of female superintendents that were currently practicing and possess a

background in poverty being small, this study's sample size was further decreased by the number of participants who have already taken part in other studies. The sample size of participants is in no way meant to represent all races.

### **Summary and Organization of the Study**

Narrative non-fiction method was chosen in order to allow the voices of the past to speak out to the stakeholders in the present. This study focused on the lives of female educators and leaders who held the position of school superintendent at the time of the study. Specifically, the study focused on lived experiences of participants as a child in poverty, a teen in poverty and the adult from poverty, as well as how the female superintendents from poverty are currently using their past to change the future for others who live in poverty. The education and relationships that helped turn their lives around were explored.

Chapter I reviewed the background of women from poverty in education. The child, the teen and the woman were explored in the background of women from poverty who chose to pursue a career in education. The intersectionality between the woman, and their socio-economic upbringing and her current career was also explored. Chapter I included the problem and purpose statements as well as a discussion of the significance of the study.

Chapter II provides the historical context of past research, as a conceptual framework, that guided the researcher in her exploration of female superintendents from poverty and how they were able to use education and relationships to come out of poverty. Poverty as a whole was explored as well as literature in the categories of

situational poverty and generational poverty. Literature that illuminated the child and teen living in poverty, and the adult from poverty were explored to highlight the lived experiences of female superintendents. Furthermore, the researcher explored literature that explained the school and poverty, the teacher and poverty, achieving success, religion and poverty, the superintendent and poverty, the female superintendent and quality education and quality relationships.

Chapter III provides insight into the research design and methodology used to conduct this study. Narrative non-fiction lends itself to allowing the voices of the past to inform the present in a retrospective manner. Chapter III also provides the overview of how the participants of the study were selected and the setting of the story. It explains the data collection of the narrative and how the data are analyzed and communicated. The role of the researcher and the software used were explained.

Chapter IV, V and VI present the lived experiences of Dr. R., Mrs. C. and Mrs. L., respectively. Each chapter begins with an introduction of how I chose each participant and how we met. The introduction was followed by her lived experiences as the child in poverty, the teen in poverty and the adult from poverty.

Chapter VII explains the analysis of narrative for the study. The researcher provides an overview of each participant and the common themes that emerged from the stories shared by each participant and organized in the categories of the child, the teen and the adult. In Chapter VIII, the researcher provides conclusions of the study,

implications of the study, recommendation for future research, recommendations beyond research and closing remarks.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of the literature review was to explore the available literature related to the disproportionate number of female sitting superintendents in the state of Texas from poverty and identify the factors that aided their path out. In this review of literature, the researcher sought the turning points in their lives, and the factors that helped them to remove the curse of poverty off their lives to become the leader of schools. This review of literature aided in identifying multiple viewpoints on poverty and its effects on the child, the teen and the adult from poverty. It also aided in revealing the disproportionate number of female superintendents in Texas. This review of literature explored the gap in literature where the subject matter combines the two, female superintendents and poverty. In this study, the intersectionality of gender, career choice and socio-economic status interlocked in what Nakhid et al. (2015) discussed as a unique social space that is occupied by an oppressed group who should not be placed into a box but are allowed to occupy multiple categories which should serve to liberate the subjects of this study.

Many studies were written about the disproportionate representation of females in the office of superintendent, such as Stroh (2012) and others explored the effects of poverty on students like O'Connor (2004) but very few have linked the two together to look for any advantages or disadvantages that may exist. This review of literature is divided into three parts, the child in poverty, the teen in poverty and the woman from poverty. This study explored the history of each, moving forward in time to current day.

The conceptual framework used in this body of work of narrative non-fiction is symbolic interactionism. Crossman (2017) identified symbolic interactionism as the perspective that people develop and rely upon social interaction. Crossman (2017) continued to explain that symbolic interaction theory analyzes society through the subjective meaning that people impose upon objects, events and behaviors. This framework was chosen because it takes into consideration the differences in the experiences of each female superintendent from poverty and the events that caused her to arrive at the same decision as the others, to become a superintendent. The intersectionality of gender, generational poverty and race are all factors that have played a part in the lives of these women. Being a female in a leadership role has its own challenges such as gender biases as pointed out by Mokaba-Bernardo (2016). The female superintendent's ability to use the formal language register as explained by Payne (1996) aided her in obtaining the top position as a superintendent.

## **Poverty**

This section examines the effects of poverty on the development of the child, the teen and the adult while illuminating the factors that aided the female superintendent

from poverty out of its confines. In order to study poverty, the researcher must identify a definition of poverty. Fisher (2011) defined poverty as the minimum level of income that is needed to obtain adequate standard of living. The national government has been faced with establishing guidelines to define poverty as whole regardless of what region or state the family resides.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2014) provided thresholds to measure the amount of annual income by the number of family members to ascertain whether or not a person or family is living in poverty. Fisher (2011) pointed out that the federal government's guidelines set the threshold of poverty at \$10,830 for a single person in 2006. With the base annual income set by the number of members in the family Deluna Castro (2015) pointed out that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services set the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) by using the thresholds provided by the U.S. Census Bureau. Deluna Castro (2015) explained that governmental agencies use the FPL to determine if low-income families are eligible for public assistance such as food stamps, Medicaid, Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program or (CHIP), child care subsidies and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or (TANF).

The Texas Education Agency or TEA reported that if a member of a student's family receives public assistance the children in that family automatically qualifies for the free lunch program (Copeland, 2015). Jensen (2009) communicated the definition of poverty given by the Office of Management and Budget as income less than what is needed to buy the basic needs in life. This review of literature centers on the causes and

effects of generational poverty, how stakeholders can minimize the negative effects and maximize academic and social achievement of each student living in poverty.

### **Situational poverty.**

Carlock (2013) believed that there is not just one face to poverty. Poverty exists in every state in the United States. Kneebone and Berub (2013) pointed out that the picture of poverty does not only occur in the slums of the inner city but also in the suburban neighborhoods of America. Denney (2012) explained that situational poverty is different than generational poverty in that it is caused by a circumstance such as the loss of a job by the bread winner, illness or divorce and occurs for a shorter length of time. McKernan and Ratcliff (2002) explained that there is no single path into poverty or out of poverty. Kneebone and Berub (2013) discussed the many causes of poverty from situational factors such as loss of job, housing or simply economic down turns affect students in a different way than the factors of generational poverty. Carlock (2013) discussed interviewing a person in poverty living in a 3,000 square foot mansion because they lost their job, about to lose their home and was bankrupt. McKernan et al. (2002) maintained that person who once lived in a two person headed home often ended up entering into poverty when they switch to a one-person female headed home due to divorce or death.

### **Generational poverty.**

Generational poverty is defined by Beegle (2003) as being born into a family with low-education and being surrounded by generations of family members who hold menial-wage employment and sometimes engage in migrant work. Jensen (2009) maintained

that generational poverty is being born into poverty and being unequipped to move out of the situation. In generational poverty, some of the characteristics exhibited by families plagued by poverty are families who do not have assets in the form of land or do not know anyone who has benefited from obtaining a degree or certificate. They are usually highly mobile, have family members who are illiterate and just focus on making it through the day.

The students who are growing up in generational poverty are identified as soon as they start school. TEA used the guidelines established by the Department of Health and Human Services to identify students whose family receives public assistance (Deluna Castro, 2015). If a student's family receives public assistance, the student is eligible for free lunch and he or she is identified as "at-risk", which means that a student is more likely to fail in school and in life (Deluna Castro, 2015). The Texas Education Agency identified and provided guidelines for at-risk students under The State Compensatory Education or SCE program (Copeland, 2015). In an effort to make up any disparities in the number of LEA students and the students who are at risk of dropping of high school (tea.texas.gov, 2016), the state has provided guidelines in the Texas Education Codes to assist these students.

Dell'Angelo (2014) reported that children born into poverty have less time to explore and learn in joyful experiences thus creating limited access to a quality education. Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, and Zhao (2013) offered the viewpoint that because of consistent preoccupation with financial concerns at home, students from poverty have less cognitive resources to deal with choice and action. Marquis-Hobbs (2014) pointed

out that middle class and upper class families discuss college with their children but for children living in poverty, they live in a constant survival mode and do not have time to focus on the future. The situations that happen in the life of a child living in poverty can be interlocking components that perpetuate the life components of poverty. Howard, Desser, and Dunklee (2009) explained that a child from poverty begins school a year and a half behind their wealthier counterparts. Davis (2005) pointed to the effects of poverty as being devastating to the child and to society. Mani et al. (2013) explained that lower levels of education can cause increased misunderstandings of contractual terms and less parental guidance which many influence next generational parenting styles.

### **The Child in Poverty**

The U.S. Department of Education or USDOE (2012) explained that poverty stricken families are unable to sustain a decent standard of living that allows them to fully participate in mainstream society. Hair et al. (2015) maintained that this can affect students in the classroom. The effects of poverty can affect the student physically, emotionally and mentally (Bruce, 2008). The U.S. Census Bureau report (2014) explained that a family of four with a gross income of less than \$24,036 is considered to be living in poverty. The National Center for Children reported that sixteen million children or 22% of all children live below the poverty line (Vandenhole, 2014). Vandenhole (2014) pointed out that poverty is the biggest threat to a child's well-being.

Generational poverty cripples students simply because they lack the same experiences afforded other students who are not living in poverty. Pollard-Durodola (2003) pointed out that special attention must be given to increase school experiences.

Davis (2005) reported that even though these students have a difficult time in school, it does not mean they are unable to become academically successful.

The United States Census Report (2014) pointed out that 11.6% or 9.5 million families were below the poverty line. Education appears to be the key that can unlock the door for many of these families. The U. S. Census (2014) reported that people who dropped out of high school made up 28.9% of people living in poverty. That percentage was cut by more than half to 14.2% if the student graduated from high school. It fell further to 10.2%, if the adult had some college but no degree. Education does not guarantee that families will not live in poverty because within the same U. S. Census Report (2014) people who held a bachelor's degree make up 5% people/families living in poverty. Davis (2005) countered by pointing out that the higher the education level of the parents, the less likely the family will live in poverty.

Dyson, Hett, and Blair (2007) explained that poverty threatens child development, school achievement and other academic behavior. Since teachers spend a large amount of time with students daily, they can foster the concept of resiliency but only after they, themselves understand it (Marapodi, 2001). Marquis-Hobbs (2014) explained that the same difficulties that are experienced by children in poverty can also help the strengthen them and build resilience and confidence. With learning, the concept of resilience, teachers can begin to build resilience in their students (Zaff & Smerdon, 2007). Teachers are not the only professionals that can help more students break the chains of generational poverty. School counselors can help by providing support systems for the students (Swanson, 2006). Marquis-Hobbs (2014) reported that schools who focus on building the

student's belief in their own strengths are seeing a reduction in trauma to the student due to poverty.

### **School and Poverty**

As explained in the preceding sections, poverty is a debilitating problem that stretches in the far corners of the world. Davis (2005) explained that children from poverty have decreased access to basic resources thus putting them at-risk for mental health issues and delayed developmental skills. Delisle (2008) explained that poverty robs the student of the basic needs in life, resources and services.

When dealing with students living in poverty, Denney, (2012) pointed out that providing positive influences are beneficial. Carter (2014) pointed to studies that show that children living in poverty are affected with poor cognitive issues and low school performance. Davis (2005) and Pamuck (2003) expressed that the success of educational, behavioral and economic chances in adulthood is increased by the well-being of childhood development early in the child's life.

Children begin school at the age of five in the state of Texas (TEA, 2016). When a child begins Kindergarten, they are expected to learn the basics such as counting sequence in Math, listening, reading and writing in English/Language Arts, and being a responsible citizen in Social Studies (TEKS, 2016). These are just a few of objectives assigned to students in kindergarten.

Children from poverty often do not feel the freedom to explore their world. Brisbane (2000) pointed out that at a young age, children normally have fears of imaginary dangers such as ghosts, robbers, kidnappers or vampires but the students living

in poverty may live in neighborhoods where crime is a high occurrence and may have seen many bad things happen. These students have high stress that middle class student may not have. Brisbane (2000) explained that this stress can create health problems such as stomachaches, headaches, moodiness, irritability and trouble eating and sleeping. Students from poverty pay less attention in class because of the way they feel. Shannon (2014) explained that students who were hungry, sick, sleepy or anxious did not take advantage of opportunities to read at school. This chronic stress affect brain development, impairs behavior and increases impulsive behaviors (Evans, 2004).

### **The Development of the Teen**

Howard et.al (2009) explained that children from poverty are not provided with experiences that afford them the foundation that is needed for academic success. Hair et al. (2015) discussed that students from poverty perform poorly in school but teachers can help students focus on the basics to increase their core academic skills through problem solving. By providing the student, who is living in poverty, the support and resources that are needed, the educator is, as Kendig, Mattingly and Bianchi (2014) expressed, breaking the trajectories of poverty among individuals and the intergenerational transmission of poverty among families.

### **The Development of the Adult**

Adults from poverty have survived many hardships in their lives. Davis (2005) pointed to the cultural theory of poverty that stated people are more likely to stay in poverty because it is the environment and culture in which they live. In other words, it is all they know. This attitude was passed down and learned from other family members.

Jones et al. (2016) explained that adults in poverty do not have the cognitive resources necessary to plan, prioritize and access support and service. Adults from poverty do not have what Jones et al. (2016) reported as an *Executive Function* (EF) and self-regulation. Jones et al. (2016) explained EF as the essential skills that enable children and adults to be successful in their lives. The authors further clarified that *Executive Function* EF and self-regulation are important in the lives of adults from poverty because they help to enable coping skills such as emotion regulation and flexible problem solving skills, which are needed to navigate life.

Many people from poverty quit their jobs if they get mad (Payne, 2005), and do not use conflict resolution strategies. Thomas (2002) explained that conflict management reduces negative impact and restores fairness and working relationships. This is evidence that supports the study done by Jones et al. (2016) which found that *Executive Function* (EF) skills are important in adults to help govern complex behaviors like setting long-terms goals, and effective decision making and planning. Being born into generational poverty, the children in the family are not equipped with the keys of resolving conflict because as pointed out by Valentine (2008) there is a lack of good role models at schools, home and in their neighborhood. Valentine (2008) explained that people in poverty live in unpredictable environments and do recognize that they have options. An adult who has successfully transitioned out of poverty has not only invested in higher education as pointed out by Kendig et al. (2014) but has successfully postponed marriage, childbearing and slowly settled into adulthood.

## The Teacher and Poverty

Zeichner (2007) explained that teachers from middle-class up-bringing do not understand the behaviors of students who live in poverty. This may eventually lead to the defeatist attitude that many of these students developed (Bollard, 2003). Teacher effectiveness is paramount to turning around the ravages of poverty. Sass et al. (2012) pointed to the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research's report that found effective teacher in high poverty areas were just as effective as teachers in low poverty schools but fell behind in the area of ineffective teachers in high poverty schools were not on par with ineffective teachers in low poverty schools.

Students that are in low performing schools, tend to be African-American or Hispanic (Sass et al., 2012). They tend to live through language barriers (Joos, 1999), hidden rules (Payne, 2005), and many tend to give up on gaining exceptional levels in the academic arena (Berger et al., 2004).

Feelings of low self-esteem and defeat are compounded when the teachers in the high poverty schools tend to be less likely to hold a regular license or be certified and are new to the profession (Sass, 2012). Many teachers are from middle-class upbringing and are unable to relate to these students (Zeichner, 2007). Teachers who remain for extended years at one campus may foster positive relationships with the students and play an important role in these students' lives. Leroy & Symes (2001) pointed out that with these types of relationships, teachers are able to detect any warning signs that may place student at risk for failure.

## Achieving Success

Davis (2005) expressed that students can overcome obstacles to experience academic success. Peters (2010) expressed that it is impossible to teach a child if the educator does not capture and inspire the child. Every student is different and Jones et al. (2016) indicated that teachers who developed and understood that education alone could not solve the problems that plague students from poverty, were able to achieve success. Dweck (2006) explained that Alfred Binet recognized that the people who start out being the smartest do not end up the smartest. Blankstein (2004) commented that when educators and other stakeholders recognized that the job was not about just teaching math or science but about saving lives, all students benefited.

O'Brien (2015) pointed to education of all stakeholders in cultural competency, diversity and leadership training as a way to increase awareness of students living in poverty. Students of poverty, like all others, need to feel safe and supported as explained by Parrett and Budge (2016). Parrett et al. (2016) also explained that the key to helping students from poverty is the presence of a caring adult who can create a supportive atmosphere for the students. A child in poverty, as discussed by Parrett et al. (2016) can greatly increase the chance for success when there is comprehensive support present. It is easy to discount a student who seemingly does not care to learn but Payne (2008) emphasized that building a relationship of respect is the key. Johnson (2015) argued that everything that happens in schools are built upon the type of relationship teachers have with the students and how they validate them. Brown (2014) expressed that teachers must engage students to learn about their interests thus creating quality relationships.

McClain (2015) reported that a student from poverty who experienced problems with behavior, responded to a positive behavior system. Johnson (2015) explained that many educators refer to this as a soft principle. If connecting with the student will increase the hope in the life of a child, why not work to connect. Connecting with just the student is the first step and will help the student but Hill, Witherspoon, and Bratz (2016) proposed that forging a relationship with the parents will deepen the connection with the student. Johnson (2015) established seven ways to connect and validate poverty students. The first, as echoed by Payne (2008) is to establish a caring and believing environment. Then get to know each student by name. Calling each of them by name also show respect and that the teacher or administrator cared enough to learn their name. McClain (2015) expressed that when praising a student, you must be specific because they have heard negative responses all their life. McClain (2015) discussed that teachers should take the extra time to be specific to help increase the students' self-esteem and then determine what each individual student is interested in and use that to connect with them.

### **The Impact of Religion on poverty**

Religion plays an important role in the lives of American daily (Schieman, 2011). Religion is defined by Banerjee and Canda (2009) as organized patterns of beliefs, values and practices. Many families, who live in poverty depend on religion as Glock (1964) and Schieman (2011) expressed, to make decisions in everyday life. Sheieman (2011) concluded that families who have low SES resources depend on religion for security. Banjerjee et al. (2009) explained that women dealing with poverty and

oppression use religion as a support to meet the challenges in life. Religious institutions also play a pivotal role in the lives of families living in poverty (Taylor & Chatters, 2010). Women living in poverty use religion to address what Taylor et al. (2010) referred to as life conditions and circumstances that occur in the lives of the families living in poverty. Banerjee et al. (2009) indicated that when a woman is able to tap into the resources of deep meaning and purpose in life, she would gain the strength that is needed to navigate life.

### **The Superintendent and Poverty**

Superintendents are faced with providing all student populations the opportunity to be successful students and a chance at an equal life (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999). The superintendent as the leader of schools has the power to create programs that involve all stakeholders and increase the success of all students (Cawelti, 1999). Kelsey et al. (2014) expressed that the majority of superintendents in the state of Texas are male figures but women are gaining ground and leading school. Many superintendents identify other school leaders who were successful and put the strategies employed by the successful superintendents in place. In a study conducted by Garn and Brown (2008), the female superintendent identified mentors who were able to help her in obtaining a superintendent position. The mentors of female superintendents were identified as successful leaders who are child focused and provided a collaborative environment (Tellerico, 2000a).

The superintendent is the head of schools and, as pointed out by Sampson and Davenport (2010) and Katz (2005), is the “highest ranking administrator”. Garrett-Staib

et al. (2015) pointed out that school administrators have a powerful impact on teacher efficacy and student outcomes because they chose effective leadership practices.

Through choosing these practices, Garrett-Staib et al. (2015) declared superintendents to have a significant effect on culture, climate and the environment at each school in their district.

Many believe that the practices used by one superintendent may not work for another superintendent or for another school, however Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) disagreed by stating that in previous studies results have shown that superintendents of academically successful school district share similar leadership practices and approaches. These superintendents are dedicated to the improvement of student achievement. There were several practices that successful superintendents use to improve student achievement. One of the leadership practices as discussed by Forner et al. (2012), which was shared by the academically successful school superintendents was collaborative goal-setting that included all the district's relevant stakeholders. Kouzes and Posner (2012) stated that an effective superintendent encourages others to act. The next leadership practice as shared by Forner et al. (2012) is establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instructions. The superintendent is charged with having a vision for every employee and student under his or her care. The next practice is aligning board support for the district's progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals. According to Forner et al. (2012), to achieve district progress, the superintendent must do so through continuous monitoring, effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals and by providing defined autonomy to principals within

clearly defined operational boundaries. Forner et al. (2012) pointed out that all these common leadership practices may not take care of all that a school needs but they have been proven by effective leaders to work.

### **The Female Superintendent**

With the many years that have passed since the Women's suffrage movement began in 1848, women's rights have steadily improved but more change is needed. In today's world, more women than men are progressing into post-secondary degrees (Hickman, 2015). Hickman (2015) confirmed that the millennial generation, who are the youngest workers, are bringing new values and expectations to the workplace and are changing how things are perceived. Hickman (2015) reported that young males who had female-dominated homes or have been influenced by a female, showed no concern about working for a female leader. In this study, 20% of the participants showed a preference for working with a female leader. This shows promise for the advancement of females in leadership.

Often, the female superintendent has had many barriers to overcome in order to gain a superintendent position. Female superintendents face many different problems. O'Brien (2014) presented a convincing case that women are experiencing a leadership gap at all organizations, not just public school districts. She pointed out that with women making up 51% of the populations they are underrepresented at top positions in state legislature, 24.2%, Congress, 18.5% Executive Officers, 14.6%, Fortune 500 CEO, 4.6%, management positions, 9%, and senior management at Silicon Valley, 14%. O'Brien (2014) explained that while showing gaps at the top leadership jobs in public school

districts, women make up at least 75% of teaching jobs. Sampson et al. (2010) explained that a possible reason that so few women in the superintendent position is because so few women occupy the position. The leadership styles are dominated and set by the people who are holding the job and historically that has been the male. Jackson, Engstrom, and Emmers-Sommer (2007) proposed that because gender stereotypes prevent others from seeing and acknowledging the women who do have leadership practices, in effect rendering them as invisible leaders.

The females' leadership practices tend to lean toward building relationships and teaching (Sampson et al., 2010; Shakeshaft, 1989). This aids the student from poverty because as Brown (2014) stated that to help students in poverty, educators must develop long-term relationships with them. Neuman (2011) proclaimed that students cannot become something they cannot see. Sampson et al. (2010) and Vail (1999) indicated that some women are viewed as not comfortable with power, public scrutiny and political elicitation which is further examined by Forner et al. (2012), who identified the challenges of being a superintendent in rural areas. Forner et al. (2012) observed that a rural superintendent must deal with poverty, can be overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities and can be forced to live a public life. Foldy (2006) emphasized that stereotypes of leadership qualities, potential and ability are associated with that of men, creating physiological barriers to women's advancement in managerial and leadership roles.

## **Quality Education and Quality Relationships**

Davis (2005) explained that there are many factors that cause a student to be at-risk of failing out of school. Providing a quality education for students earlier in life has been shown to improve student's practical and academic abilities (Kremer-Sadlik, & Fatigante, 2015). Davis (2005) identified mentoring and reading programs along with increased use of social skills as helpful for the student to overcome adversity. Caugherty (2016) expressed that early programs such as Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and Head Start are programs that encourage the emergence of the child out of poverty. Programs that emphasize developing relationships with staff, increased parent participation in education of the student showed increased linguistic, cognitive and socioemotional development of children ages two and three (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2015).

Providing a quality education for poverty students requires a mind shift of staff members from pity to understand that humans can change given the right chemistry and circumstances. Caugherty (2016) pointed to physical obstacles such as decreased access to technology as one of several barriers that hold students back.

Parrett and Budge (2012) identified several key factors that have been successfully used in high-poverty, high-achieving schools. At the top of the list is a school-wide student recognition program where students are rewarded publically for their academic achievements.

Quality relationships in the development of every child are important. Caugherty (2016) explained that providing the students with useful ways in which to deal with adversity will aid the student to cope with hardships in life. Payne (2005) identified that

students living in poverty are often neglected by parents who are working to provide for the child. Students come to school and create relationships with peers, school staff members, and these relationships can be beneficial for the students. Davis (2005) noted that children from poverty often endure social problems while at school. Providing a stable environment for the student from poverty will enable the student to learn resilience and build strength and belief in self (Marquis-Hobbs, 2014).

As demonstrated in the preceding review of literature, female superintendents from poverty have found the path out of poverty through, as Payne (2009) pointed out, education and relationships. Female superintendents have found through negative influences and circumstances to become life-changing leaders of their communities, staff and most of all students. Poverty has been long documented as causing debilitating effects on the life of children and their futures. Recent research has shown that change can happen with early academic intervention (Hill et al., 2016) by the educational institution and the onset of quality relationships (Payne, 2005) to help the students from poverty combat negative influences. Barnet, and Boocock (1998) explained the early child education is the key to making lasting changes in the lives of poor students. The female superintendent from poverty had to rise above all the negativity and the hardships her life only to be met with barriers that blocked her way. This too has changed.

### **Summary**

In chapter II, the researcher explored the literature that related to the disproportionate number of female superintendents from poverty. This review of literature explored the gaps in literature on poverty both situational and generational. It

continued to explore how poverty affects a person as a child, a teen and adult. The review of studies also explored the important role of the teacher and superintendent in lives of the student living in poverty. In chapter II, the researcher reviewed the literature on poverty, the child in poverty, the school and poverty, the teen in poverty, the adult in poverty, the teacher and poverty, achieving success, religion and poverty, the superintendent and poverty, the female superintendent and the role of quality education and relationships.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of three female superintendents from poverty to ascertain how they were able to elevate out of poverty to become leaders of their school districts. The researcher also sought to determine how growing up in poverty affects their current leadership strategies when dealing with students who currently live in poverty.

The research design chosen for this dissertation was narrative non-fiction story method. This method was chosen because it allows the voice of the participants, as female superintendents, to express their lived experiences in their own words of growing up in poverty. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that a narrative inquiry is understanding the lived experiences to the point that the researcher can construct meaning.

In this chapter, the research method is discussed, including the participants and the setting, the role of the researcher, how data was collected, analyzed and communicated. The following question guided this research:

1. After transitioning through the stages of life, what are the lived experiences of female superintendents from poverty that enabled them to elevate out of poverty to lead a district with a majority of students living in poverty?

The remaining questions that were asked by the researcher depended on the response of the participants during the narrative data collection. The researcher allowed the participants to tell their stories with no interference from the researcher.

### **Narrative Nonfiction**

Polkinghorne (1995) explained that narrative combines diverse events of the participants' life into thematically unified goal-directed processes. The individuals' experiences are collected and organized in chronological order. The participants are free to discuss their past, present and their future, which allowed the researcher insight into the identities of the individuals and how they may see themselves and their own experiences. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) stated that a narrative studies the way participants live their lives. Many different forms of data collection are used to gather the information in a narrative non-fiction study. The data collection method used in this study was interviews. Collecting the stories of women superintendents from poverty in the narrative non-fiction story method was important because the participants are able to express and examine their lived experiences and the turning points in their lives.

Polkinghorne (1995) pointed out that a narrative draws together diverse experiences of human life into a unified goal-directed process. The process of data collection will be discussed later in this chapter.

Polkinghorne (1995) categorized narratives into two forms, analysis of narrative and narrative analysis. In the first form, analysis of narrative, Polkinghorne (1995) explained that it is a collection of data in the form of stories that are analyzed with paradigmatic processes resulting in descriptions of themes that are identified across the stories of each participant. The use of written documents such as autobiographies, biographies and transcribed interviews are sources that are collected and analyzed to produce what Connelly et al. (2006) explained as a way of characterizing the human experience. The outcome has a plot with a beginning, middle and end. In an analysis of narrative, more than one story must be analyzed to discover a common thread.

In the narrative analysis, Polkinghorne (1995) acknowledged that the individual life elements are analyzed to be retold as stories with a plot. The researcher collects descriptions of events and use those descriptions to construct a story. When constructing a story, the researcher discovers a plot that links the data elements. Polkinghorne (1995) explained that the purpose of the narrative analysis is to produce a story as an outcome for the research. Narrative analysis uses interviews, journals, public and personal documentation and observations as sources to obtain data.

This research identified common threads that helped the participants of this study to overcome the negative bonds of poverty and become the leader of a school district. The narrative non-fiction method was used to retell the story from the past to the present of three current female superintendents from poverty.

## The Participants / Setting

In a narrative non-fiction study, ‘who’ is selected to tell her story is a very important component. The study conducted by Dr. Amanda Smith (2014), entitled *Poverty Leadership: Life Experiences and Academic Success of Women Superintendents Who Were Raised in Poverty*, examined the lived experiences of female superintendents from poverty. There are many similarities in this study and that of Dr. Smith’s study such as both studies focused on female superintendents from poverty and their rise out of poverty. There are distinct differences between the studies. One difference between the two studies was the researcher of this study sought to determine, through examination of the participants’ lived experiences, how the female superintendents were able to elevate themselves out of poverty to become the leader of their school district. Their stories are an important component in this process. The process used to distinguish the differences between the subjects and to confirm the identities of the final subjects for this study focused on a select set of criteria that guided selection participants.

The participants were chosen for the study through mutual contact and snowball method. Hays and Singh (2012) clarified the snowball method as identifying a contact, asking them if they have knowledge of other participants thus allowing the first contact to help identify others. By the term of mutual contact, the researcher had knowledge of a professor at a local university, who had connections to a company that aids school districts in hiring superintendents in the state of Texas. The researcher approached the professor about sharing knowledge of at least one female superintendent that would be available to participate in the study. After the IRB was approved, the researcher contacted

the sitting female superintendent to obtain permission for participation. She expressed a willingness to participate in the study. The participant was checked for all criteria by the researcher and asked if the participant had knowledge of any other female superintendents from poverty. This set the snowball method in action. The initial participant identified two other potential candidates and the researcher contacted them through email (see Appendix A) to ascertain if they met all the criteria of the study. The criteria considered for selection included:

1. All participants must hold a superintendent certification and currently practicing as a school superintendent.
2. All participants must have knowledge of and be willing to share lived experiences of living in poverty.
3. All participants must be female.
4. All participants must have been raised in Texas.
5. All participant must not have participated in any other dissertation study similar to this study.

After each participant was cleared to participate in the study and each had signed the required informed consent form (see Appendix B), data collection began. Each participant was identified by a pseudonym to protect her identity. No mention of the participants' race was used for the same reason.

All selected female superintendents self-identified as having grown up in poverty and chose to take part in this study. Upon agreeing to participate in this study, each participant was presented with a welcome package that contained a letter from the

researcher, formally explaining the background of the researcher and what is expected during the research (see Appendix C). The final items enclosed in the welcome package included the contact information of the researcher and an overview of the interview protocol. Interview questions were reserved for the actual interview sessions. Each participant was contacted at least a week in advance to schedule each interview session.

The settings for each of the three superintendents was self-selected by the participant; surroundings that were familiar and safe to her. This protocol assisted in helping each participant feel at ease and relaxed while speaking with the researcher. Each participant was assured of confidentiality and that their privacy would be protected. In the first interview, the interview protocol was unstructured to allow the participant to dictate the information she would like to share.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

In a narrative non-fiction study, the role of the researcher is to carry out the purpose of narrative research. Polkinghorne (1988) explained that the purpose of descriptive narrative research is to “produce accurate description of the interpretive narrative accounts of individuals or groups that are used to make sequences of events in their lives or organizations meaningful” (p. 62). In this research, the role of the researcher was to record the lived experiences of each of the participants’ story and truthfully analyze and report each experience without influence from the researcher. Connelly et al. (2006) expressed that the researcher must construct and reconstruct an account of the lives of the participants. Researchers must capture and re-tell stories that

will enable the audience to derive meaning' from the lived experiences of the participants (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995).

In this qualitative study, the role of the researcher was a process that this researcher broke into three areas of before the meeting, during the meeting and after the meeting. First, before each meeting, the role of the researcher was as a planner, manager and researcher. As the planner, the researcher had to plan the study, research for who would be a part of the study and manage the information obtained through the research.

During the meetings, the role of the researcher changed. The researcher was the interviewer, observer, politician, recorder and manager. As the interviewer, the researcher had the responsibility to create conversation about the life of the female superintendent and develop an atmosphere of trust so that the female superintendent from poverty felt confident that the private information that was given would not be mishandled. The researcher also took on the role of observer of the female superintendent, observing facial expressions, voice level, and emotions, thus capturing the essence of who the female superintendent really was and how that particular event affected her life. As the politician, the researcher was able to discuss the issues that affect students in the superintendents' districts today. Finally, the role of the researcher was to again manage the information that was obtained during the interview through recordings, notes and observations.

The last area that is covered is after the meeting. The role of researcher changed into being the planner, transcriber, analyst, narrator, artist and manager. After each meeting, the researcher began to plan the final stages of how the information was

transcribed and where the information was stored, both digital and hard copies. After the transcription was completed, the researcher set about analyzing the information obtained. As an artist, the researcher observed patterns and began to organize those patterns into stories to be told as the narrator. The researcher continued to manage all the data, people and materials needed to complete the study.

To summarize, the role of the researcher was an ever changing, constantly revolving role that ranged from planning out each stage of the process to organizing the stories to be told. As the planner, manager, researcher, interviewer, observer, politician, recorder, transcriber, analyst, narrator and artist, the researcher embodied each job to produce what Brunner (1990) expressed as storied narratives.

## **Data Collection**

Polkinghorne (2005) explained that data gathered in a study is to provide evidence for the experiences being investigated. One of the roles of the researcher, is also to manage the relationship by gaining the participants confidence. Polkinghorne (2005) expressed that in order to obtain quality data, the researcher must establish an open and trusting relationship with each participant.

Interviews and observations play a significant role in this study. There were three rounds of interviews conducted to collect narrative data. Polkinghorne (2005) pointed out that the data needed for an extensive study requires intensive exploration thus the research must invest in quality time with the female superintendents. Berg, Lune and Lune (2004) added that any information gathered can be used in the study to help solve the research question. Quality time with the female superintendents was required to

create this trusting relationship. Each interview was recorded on a digital device and transcribed and coded by the researcher to examine the ideas and thoughts of the participants to maintain fidelity within the story (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). Each meeting was started by revisiting the information discussed in the last meeting and then moving into current meeting questions. During each meeting the researcher took notes on points of discussion. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes due to the time constraints of current public school superintendents. The researcher remained conscience of being professional and staying on task so as to not waste the superintendents' time.

The researcher interviewed the participants as well as observed each participant as she discussed her past lived experiences, both in poverty as a child and in the role of superintendent as women that had elevated from poverty to the position of superintendent. The researcher then extracted valid information in an effort to expose what Creswell (2013) called epiphanies or turning points in the female superintendents' life. As data were collected, the data were organized and stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home away from public access and only accessible by the researcher. Following IRB requirements, after three years the data and related materials will be destroyed.

### **Interview protocol.**

Polkinghorne (2005) described that during an interview the interviewer follows a conversational thread opened by the interviewee and continues the conversation by guiding it toward producing a full account of the lived experiences. Each participant signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B); signing the informed consent form

confirmed the participant's agreement to discuss her past lived experiences in poverty.

The participant gave her consent to participate in the study and for her interviews to be included in this study. Once the form was signed, the researcher conducted the interviews.

### **Interview sessions.**

The first meeting with each female superintendent was face-to-face with the purpose of setting the tone of the working relationship. Seidman (1991) expressed that in the first meeting, the researcher must use it to develop a rapport, get acquainted and set the scene for a quality experience. A setting familiar to the participant was chosen to gain the participant's trust. In this first interview, the researcher posed one question (see Appendix C) to the participant. How the participant answered the initial question dictated the remaining questions that were asked by the researcher. The interview process was unstructured to ensure that the patriciate's lived experiences were told in the order that she chose. During this meeting, the female superintendent was asked the research question, after transitioning through the stages of life, what are the lived experiences of the female superintendent from poverty that enable her to elevate out of poverty to lead a district with a majority of students living in poverty. She began to discuss her childhood and how her life was and who she was as a child. The researcher only interrupted to ask clarifying questions such as "Since you were raised by your grandmother, did you see your mother often?" She answered my questions to clarify and then moved into her life as a teen. Without prompting from the researcher, the participant included lived experiences from school. Clarifying questions were asked and the

participant began to discuss her adult life. When the interview was over, the researcher thanked the female superintendent and asked for a second meeting to go over the data received. With a new date set, the researcher thanked the participant again and left the office.

The second meeting was a face-to-face meeting with each female superintendent. This meeting was more focused on the lived experiences of the female superintendent concerning her coming from poverty. A review of the previous meeting's information was discussed to clear up any misunderstandings. The superintendent was asked to re-tell any stories of interest at this time. Since the interviews for this study were unstructured, any questions asked for the second interview were asked in relation to the previous responses of the female superintendents.

In the second meeting, the researcher greeted the female superintendent and asked if she remembered any stories that she had forgotten to tell the last time the researcher was there. If the participant had any stories to tell, she did so. If she did not, the researcher asked questions about her childhood to clarify and answer any questions that may have come up during transcription such as "While you were discussing the time you and your siblings were at school, your voice was very low on the recorder, who did you say came to pick you up after your house burned down?" The female superintendent answered the question and began to add to the story. Clarifying questions were asked by the researcher on the new information. After the meeting was finished, the researcher thanked the female superintendent and set a date and time to conduct the last and final interview.

The third meeting was much like the first two meetings where the participant was asked to retell any stores that may be unclear to the researcher. Seidman (1991) discussed that in this meeting the research should clarify any misunderstandings and allow the participants to add new information that they may have remembered since the last meeting. In the third and final interview, the researcher telephoned the participant to again ask her to add to her stories by asking if she had remembered any more stories that she wanted to tell. If the participant did not have any other stories, the researcher asked clarifying questions such as “Why do you think your grandmother said the same thing to you every day before you left for school?” The female superintendent answered the question and then launched into another story. Clarifying questions were asked by the researcher about the new information.

After each meeting, the notes were transcribed and organized into what Polkinghorne (1998) identified as private and personal stories that linked diverse events in their lives. The information obtained from each meeting was transcribed and organized to maintain order. Polkinghorne (2005) expressed that information that is needed will be lost in the transcribing of data such as the loss of pacing, intonation and emphasis on word and each can be accounted for by developing signs and symbols that can represent each. Backups to each artifact were created in an effort to minimize the loss of information should anything go wrong with computer or digital storage devices. The researcher emailed the information to herself after each meeting’s notes have been transcribed.

## **Software Usage**

Time is one of the many important components in completing this study and using a software program helped to organize data. The researcher chose to use NVivo 11 found at [www.qsrinternational.com](http://www.qsrinternational.com). With the NVivo 11 program, the researcher organizes, manages, shapes and analyzes the qualitative data (Creswell, 2013). The use of a digital recorder was to collect the audio of each interview to enable the researcher to upload the interview after being transcribed into NVivo 11 digitally. The digital recorder used to in this study was the Olympus VN-7200 digital voice recorder. Markle, West and Rich (2011) explained that using a digital recorder allows the researcher to collect, analyze and embed the information without losing the meaning conveyed at the time of interview. Using a digital recorder also aided the researcher in providing a back-up copy to the transcribed interview data. If the information is lost due to operator error or program malfunction, the researcher will still have access to interview information.

## **Data Analysis**

Creswell (2013) proposed that in a narrative study, the information is analyzed and unfolded chronologically to expose the turning points or epiphanies that exist. To organize the information into nodes, the researcher read and re-read each participants' responses to become familiar with each story. The researcher then identified specific responses and organized it under a specific node.

### **Organizing data.**

In narrative studies, there are massive amounts of data that are received and must be organized. By organizing the information, the researcher can then search for, as

Polkinghorne (1995) pointed out, information that contributes to the construction of a retrospective representation of the lived experiences of each female superintendent.

In using the NVivo 11 program, the researcher was able to organize the data received during the interview phase of this study for the data analysis section of this study. Having the data organized by using the NVivo 11 program, enabled the researcher to become intimate with the lived experiences of each female superintendent from poverty.

### **Analysis of data.**

Polkinghorne (1995) provided an extensive description of narrative analysis as a coherent development account of organized data. After all information was organized into the nodes, the researcher printed out an organized chart that identified commonalities across the lived experiences of the female superintendents from poverty. In the data analysis of this study, the examination of data as explained by Polkinghorne (1995) was used to locate common themes. After the collection of data from the interviews, the information was transcribed and uploaded into the NVivo program. Here, the researcher grouped the information in categories was discussed by Marshall and Rossman (2011) as organizing data. The researcher was able to identify themes across the participants' interviews by creating categories or nodes in the NVivo program after reading the interview transcripts several times.

In the NVivo 11 program, the stories were uploaded and labeled by the name of the participant. The researcher read through the first story up loaded line by line and decided the subject of each sentence. Once the subject was determined, the researcher

highlighted the line and moved it into the corresponding node or category. For example, if the female superintendent stated, “We moved in with my grandparents in a small house in Neches.” I then would take that sentence and move it into the node that was labeled ‘Grandparents’. Once there, the researcher continued through the transcription to locate other sentences that pertained to the discussion of grandparents by other participants.

When all the stories have been analyzed using the program NVivo 11, the researcher was able to print out charts that gave word frequencies and the most discussed topics. This is where the researcher was able to take the most discussed topics and present them as the findings of this study.

### **Provisions for Trustworthiness**

In this study, participants were asked to provide a retrospective account of their lived experiences. The reflective narrative of each female superintendent’s lived experiences were carefully analyzed and retold paying particular attention to the validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the study. By paying close attention to the fact that, as Polkinghorne (1988) addressed, the memory of past events is selective, the researcher provided an open-ended interview question (see appendix C) so that the participants could share what they chose to share.

While the interview itself followed an open-ended process, the protocol before and after the interview, the management of the interview data and the analysis of the data followed a specific protocol to ensure all data was received, managed and maintained the same manner. Before each interview, the researcher established the protocol by explaining the informed consent form (see appendix B). Each participant was asked to

sign the consent form if they agreed to participate in the study. After the signed form was secured in the researcher's binder and a copy was given to the participant, the researcher asked permission for the interview to be recorded. After the interview, the data received was transcribed by the researcher and entered into NVivo program for organization. After being uploaded to the NVivo program the information was analyzed to produce and organized chronological story. To provide for reliability and validity, the researcher used triangulation and rich, thick descriptions.

### **Triangulation.**

Polkinghorne (1995) defined triangulation as the use of many different independent reports to validate the lived events of each participant. The use of data from multiple interviews, the researcher's reflective field notes and the use of Texas Education Agency data were used to increase the validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the study. In using many different sources, it is the effort of the researcher to 'strengthen the findings and enrich the analysis' (Berg et al. 2004).

In a narrative study, Polkinghorne (1988) explained that the researcher must produce confidence that the event actually happened because the participant's interpretations are different. The participants are re-telling each lived experience from their current viewpoint and as Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) expressed they are 'attempting to reconceive the world' of the participants through a story format.

### **Rich, thick descriptions.**

The researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the physical aspects of each participant's lived experiences. Cho and Trent (2006) explained that in order to use thick

descriptions as a way to increase validity in the study, the researcher's approach must be holistic and achieved through prolonged engagement with each participant. The researcher is charged with creating a relationship with each participant to learn the body language of each. When meeting with a participant, the researcher can make note of how they felt about a specific topic just by the look in her eyes or the way she straightened her shoulders when discussing a certain topics. After each meeting, when the interviews were transcribed, the researcher took into account the participant's body language, emotions, voice inflections, and the physical surroundings using all five senses when applicable to draw the reader into the story. Polkinghorne (1988) pointed out that when coding an interview, the researcher should take note of pauses, talk-overs and voice tones to include in the study. Providing rich-thick descriptions provided by the notes from each interview enabled the researcher to write in such a way to help the reader imagine how each participant felt about a certain topic and thus increasing interest in the participant's story.

### **Communicating the Findings**

The researcher took care to accurately present the story of each female superintendents from poverty to ensure that participants were not harmed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this narrative non-fiction study the three female's voices are reported in an authentic way and careful consideration is given to not suppress their true story. Each female superintendent answered the interview questions and their responses were analyzed to extract common themes. The findings of this qualitative study were communicated in narrative non-fiction stories reported in Chapters IV through VIII. The

researcher presented the narrative story of each female superintendent and presented them as the child, the teen and the adult.

## **Summary**

In Chapter III, the researcher described the methodology of research for this narrative non-fiction study. The researcher produced an overview of the narrative non-fiction study. It was guided by the following three questions: what are the lived experiences of women superintendents from poverty, what were the deciding factors that helped influence the decision of these women superintendents to seek the top level position of superintendent, and how do these women superintendents view their current leadership practices in relation to their background in poverty?

The researcher also gives insight into the study design and how the data is collected. The data was collected by conducting interviews and observations, analyzing the information and organizing it into a story of the live experiences of each female superintendent.

Details about the participants and how they were selected was included in this chapter. The initial female superintendent chosen for the study was identified through a mutual contact by the researcher. Once the initial participant was identified, she identified others, who would participate in this study. Each participant was cleared through the chosen criteria which were: all participants must hold a superintendent certificate, all participants must have knowledge of and willing to share lived experiences of living in poverty and all participants must be female. The role of the researcher was outlined in an effort to define the boundaries. The researcher elaborated on the data

collection of the study to outline what took place in the interviews and observation. The treatment of data and how data were analyzed was also discussed. Finally, the researcher explained the provisions for trustworthiness and how she communicated the findings of this study.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Dr. “R.”**

#### **Introduction**

Dr. R. was the first participant to be contacted for this narrative non-fiction study. She was recommended to me by a professor from The University of Texas at Tyler. He gave me her name and number and was adamant that she would be more than willing to participate in the study. After the IRB was confirmed, I contacted her by phone to ask permission and she agreed to meet with me. She is an African-American female who served as superintendent for District A for many years. In her district, Dr. R. was faced with more than 80% of her district claiming economically disadvantaged status.

Meeting with her was very uplifting and informative. She was positive and energetic by nature. I contacted her by phone and she was eager to participate. We set a date to meet face to face at her home. A couple of days before our meeting, Dr. R. texted me to ask for a change of date and I gladly rescheduled. On the day of our meeting, I texted her to confirm our meeting and she readily replied with, yes. She then provided me with detailed instructions on how to get to her home. After reading through them several times, I set out for her home. On the drive over, the scenery was beautiful. The directions were perfect and I had no trouble driving straight to her home. She lived far

back off the main road but all of the roads were paved. She called me when I got into town to ask me to call her back at a certain time so that she could meet me at her gate to let me onto her land. After reaching the point where she asked me to call, I pulled over to the side of the road and called to let her know that I was almost to her home. After hanging up the phone, I drove to her home where she was standing in her driveway waving me onto her land. Her home was very beautiful and spacious. She greeted me with a hug and asked about the drive. I told her that her directions were perfect and that I had no problems finding her home. I then thanked her for being a part of my study and she said she was happy to help. She ushered me into her home and into her office. Dr. R. introduced me to her daughter and granddaughter because they were visiting for the weekend. She provided me with a drink and we sat down to begin our chat. After discussing the interview protocol, signing the informed consent form and asking permission to record the meeting on my digital recorder, Dr. R. began to tell me her story.

### **The Child**

As a child, Dr. R. did not know or believe that she lived in poverty. With a chuckle, she explained, “So, growing up, I actually thought we were rich.” Living with her grandparents on fifteen acres of land was how she remembered her life. After her mother and father went their separate ways, she was given to her grandmother and grandfather to raise at the age of sixteen months. She remembers living off the land for most of her food. “My grandparents had over fifteen acres of land and we grew all the food we needed. We had rows and rows of corn, beans and watermelon as well as other vegetables.” When her grandparents had enough for their needs, they would often spread

the word to relatives or others to stop by the house to pick up a bushel of peas or a few ears of corn. "This is the reason I thought we were rich! We were able to feed other families. We had enough food to feed ourselves and others." While seeing how her grandparents were able to feed other families, Dr. R. remembered that they did not have a car to go to church or to the store. When the family needed something from the store, they would depend on a relative to take them because there was no car to drive to the store. Dr. R. remarked, "Going to "town" did not happen every day or every week. It happened only once a month. When we went to the store, we got things like cheese, flour and sugar. We did not buy canned vegetables. We had all the vegetables we needed and we had animals like cows, pigs and chickens so we did not need to buy meat." She smiled, "My grandmother would come out of the store with one or two bags of groceries for the month." They would often drive to church in a wagon. "I remember going to church in a wagon and a mule pulled the wagon."

"It was not until 4<sup>th</sup> grade that we got indoor plumbing and running water." With a faraway look in her eyes, she said, "I often think that if we lived that way now, CPS would be called." Dr. R. remembered that the utility bills, like the light bill were not a problem to pay because her grandmother was a staunch believer in not using lights in the house during the day. "It was just a belief. You got up early in the morning. You turn the lights on to get dressed for school, then the lights were turned off. You use the daylight for what you needed."

Her grandfather had a fourth grade education but her grandmother had made it through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. "My grandmother always talked about going through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and

then going to Prairie view to a ‘normal’ school. Whatever that meant. She was big on education.” Dr. R’s grandmother was always an encouragement to her. With a slight smile she explained, “So as far back as I can remember, when I got ready to get on the bus, my grandmother would say, ‘Go to school and be sweet. Get an education and be somebody.’ I always remembered that.” Before attending school, Dr. R’s grandmother taught her to read, write and say her ABC’s. When asked why it was important for her grandmother to teach her these things before she went to school, with a look of pride she replied, “It was because she did not want me to be behind. It was her strong belief in education. It was her strong belief that I was going to grow up to go on and be somebody.” Dr. R was always in attendance at school. “I never missed school. If I was sick, she (grandmother) would rub me down with vic salve, or vic’s vapor rub.” This was not the end of the home remedies that were used to avoid a doctor’s visit. “I went to the dentist one time and that was after the remedy that she (grandmother) used did not work. It did work until I think Jr. High, when I had my first dental appointment.”

### **The Teen**

Clothing was a huge point of contention with Dr. R. As a teen, her grandmother made all of her clothing. This is when she knew things were different. She would take notice when her cousins got new clothes. “I focused on that,” she sighed. “They could go to the store and buy their clothes but I couldn’t because my grandmother made my clothes.” With a smile and a twinkle of remembrance in her eyes, she said, “I remember in Jr. High, my grandmother had made me a dress and a girl ripped it!” With clinched lips, she explained, “I was angry and told her, ‘my grandmother just made this!’ I had

not realized that the material was old because she took the material from something else and made the dress."

Dr. R. was not allowed to wear pants when she was younger and was only allowed to wear them when she became a teen only because she would receive so many hand-me-downs from her cousins. Only in reflection did she realize that her grandmother making her outfits was a way to save money. "I never knew there was a huge problem with that (buying me clothes). Now that I look back on it, it was good because they saved money on that." Living with her grandparents who were on a fixed income placed Dr. R. in the world of the Haves and the Have Nots.

In high school, she suffered through many occasions where she was teased because of body odor. "I remember taking a bath in a number ten tub. They called it a foot tub. You know you took a bath after you washed clothes most of the time in the blue end water. That was an adventure in the summertime but after we got running water (inside the house) we took a bath everyday but in the winter you didn't take a bath every day. 'It was too cold' my grandmother said." Her grandmother taught her to use only talcum powder as deodorant which proved to be inefficient at best. "So she only knew about talcum powder not deodorant. So there were plenty of times at school when I was teased by others saying 'Oh you smell.' I think the term they used was 'funky'. I was like, oh my god." There were many days where she had to endure the hateful words, bullying and the teasing at the hands of her classmates. "In high school, the bullying and teasing continued until one girl said it one time too many and she made a song out of it. A girl behind me had a cake pan because we were in home making and I

grabbed the cake pan and I went to work on her head." She chuckled, "To this day there is a little scar under her nose."

### **The Adult**

After completing high school, Dr. R. did not know her next move. "So I had no idea. The next best thing was to get married." She married at the age of eighteen but always knew that she would graduate college. "When we got married, I had decided that I would get married and worry about college later." Shortly after getting married, problems found their way into the happy marriage. "Nobody talked to us about how to stay together through our little issues and troubles." While problems began to drive a wedge between her and her husband, Dr. R. found a job at a daycare. The owners of the daycare noticed her and began to encourage her to go back to school. "They would say, 'girl, you're going to go back to school. You better get your butt in school. You are too smart for this.' I would always say but I don't have the money."

One day the male owner came to work, handed her an application and instructed her to fill it out. She smiled and said, "He told me 'You're going to get a scholarship and you're going to go to school. This is how you're going to start.' She took it home and filled it out. After receiving a scholarship, her bosses would not let her return to work without a schedule of classes. "I did not want to tell them that I don't know how to sign up for college. I thought what do you do?" She drove over to Tyler Junior College and got out of the car and began to ask questions. Moving from area to area, table to table, Dr. R. had no idea how she would pay for her classes. "I got in line for financial aid. I

had no idea how any of this worked.” She was able to make it through her first semester of college and went on to obtain an Associate Degree at Tyler Junior College.

With excited anticipation, Dr. R. began the same process at University of Texas at Tyler to the dismay of her husband. “He did not understand my vision.” Despite the success of obtaining her Associates degree, she wanted more. “I wanted to teach.” She sighed, “The relationship did not last. We got a divorce and I decided that there was nothing holding me back.”

With her mind made up, Dr. R. returned to school with renewed vigor. “I didn’t care who you were, you were not stopping me.” She obtained her bachelor’s degree and began her teaching career. “I taught for 6 years. It was during this time that she really understood that she had lived through poverty. “I realized that I was a kid from poverty when I started teaching. When I started having to identify students who were at risk, using the criteria, and listening to the counselors, I realized that was me! We had no vehicle, my parents were divorced and my grandparents raised me.”

Wanting to affect change in the lives of her students, she went back to school to obtain her Master’s degree. “I became a principal at the same school.” In her first year as principal, she was contacted by her college professors and invited to apply to the Doctoral program. She exclaimed, “I was scared to death! It is a doctorate!” She applied and was accepted. The real work began. “I already knew the level of work I had to do for my masters. Being visual, kinesthetic and all of the above, I have to do a lot to remember the information. I can’t just read a book, put it down and I got it. I have to read it, write it, summarize it and finally talk about it.” After teaching herself how to

study, Dr. R. was successful in obtaining her Doctorate degree. “I wanted to get my doctorate because education was important to me. I got to make a difference in this world. So teaching kids was making a difference. Being a mentor to people was making a difference.”

Taking the advice of a professor, Dr. R. left her school district to take a job as principal in Lufkin ISD. “Lufkin, was the hardest. My superintendent said this was his my hardest elementary yet. It was low-socio economic, kids of poverty, kids who have lived in worst conditions than I did. I am thinking, I did not have running water until I was in the 4th grade. We did not have this; we did not have that but there were people who lived in very intense situations. They did not take baths and I could relate to them. I did not throw them to the side.” After two years, she moved back home and took a job at Overton ISD and then moved on to take a position in Tyler ISD at a secondary campus. She stayed there for three years.

During a conversation with another principal, Dr. R. decided that she would pursue a job at central office. By summer, she had obtained an Assistant Superintendent position. “As assistant superintendent, I was at central office visiting every campus. Running into kids and administrators saying ‘Can you talk to this one or that one?’ So it was more than being assistant superintendent. I was over curriculum and instruction. I had to get curriculum and instruction out to campuses.” Serving under a superintendent who was not in the position to help others, Dr. R. decided she would go back to school and obtain her superintendent certification. “I said this is not how you do it. You must

care for the people. We are playing school here. We are not supposed to play school. We are supposed to be the school who goes above and beyond.”

After being discouraged by the same superintendent that she served under, Dr. R. sought to obtain a superintendent position. She did not allow the voice of negativity stop her. “The person I worked for said, they are not hiring women right now. My aunt, always said, ‘Honey, tell them to watch your smoke.’ I had to watch my smoke,” she chuckled. She applied to three schools and found success in her third attempt. As the superintendent of a 4A school where more than eighty percent of the student population is identified by TEA as economically disadvantaged, Dr. R. relied on the experiences in her life to help her relate to students who would not go to school. “Some kids came to school with drugs in their pockets. Thirty kids on the sidewalk with the reputation of ‘we don’t go to class.’ They would often say ‘Who are you?’ and I would have to show them who I was!” She laughed and said, “I knew the scene. You pull off your professional hat and you put on your ‘I’m yo momma hat’ and tell them, ‘Don’t go and see what is going to happen! Don’t go!’”

### **Summary**

Dr. R. started life behind the confines of poverty. At sixteen months old, she went to live with her grandparents after her parents divorced. Living with her grandparents gave her the upbringing that afforded her the opportunity to achieve the successes that she enjoys today. As a child, she endured living in a house with no indoor plumbing or running water but never knew she lacked the material things that many of her relatives enjoyed. The one thing that she did have in abundance was love and care.

Dr. R.'s grandmother cared for her by planting the seeds of success in her during her early years when she uttered the words, "Be somebody". With these words, her grandmother unleashed a thirst inside of Dr. R. that could not be quenched by the negative words of her relatives that stated she would turn out to be just like her mother and father or the bullying and teasing of her classmates. This thirst could not even be quenched by the doubt that was flung at her by a superintendent who stated that school districts did not want women to lead their schools.

Using the empowering words from her grandmother, Dr. R. worked her way through college to achieve an associates, a bachelors and two doctorate degrees, one in education, the other in theology. Living through the many setbacks in her life, Dr. R. rose above all of them to become a teacher, a principal, an assistant superintendent, superintendent and leader. With the skills taught to her by her grandmother, she continues to teach and lead her students and be the example that she always was meant to be for the students that she served.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Mrs. “C.”**

#### **Introduction**

Mrs. “C.” was the second participant that committed to taking part in this study. She is a person who I knew from my past. She was the principal at an elementary that I did some field experiences at when I was in the teacher education program at The University of Texas at Tyler. She had always been nice and obliging then and when I contacted her this time, she had not changed. She was very accommodating and welcomed me with open arms. She leads District B with more than 60% of her district in economically disadvantaged status. Mrs. C. was the perfect hostess.

The morning I met with Mrs. C., I arose early, anxious to meet and talk with her about my study. As I dressed, I ran through the many steps that I needed to do before the meeting. On the drive over to the school, I chose relaxing music in an effort to calm myself. I was excited to meet someone who had worked her way through some of the same problems that I encountered to become the leader in her district. I entered the address of the administrative office in the map app on my phone and set out for our meeting.

When I had contacted her to set the meeting up, she had wanted to meet at 12:30 so she could treat me to lunch. I arrived at the glass wrapped building at 12:15 and was mindful of the time as to not be late. I stepped out of my car and walked to the front of the building. In big bold letters on the side of the building were the words ‘I believe’. I pushed open the large glassed door and entered a spacious, two-story lobby and found a warm, soft-spoken woman who greeted me with a smile. “Hello! How can I help you?” I announced my name and who I was there to see. She nodded and asked me to sign in on a sheet. I sat down and looked around the lobby. A large television hung on a nearby wall and silently flipped through pictures of students engaged in different activities from around the district.

After a couple of minutes, I was greeted by Mrs. C. She strode into the lobby smiling. “Hello! How are you? Welcome to our district? How was the ride in today?” She engulfed me in warm, heartfelt hug and led me around the corner toward her office. There was another open area and she lead me into her spacious office. “Did you still want to go to lunch? The restaurant that I wanted to take you to is closed today but I have another one that I like to go to often.” She entered her office to retrieve her purse and we moved toward the exit. Just before walking out of the door, she invited me into another office where she introduced me to her Assistant Superintendent. We exchanged pleasantries and we promptly left for the restaurant. As I left the building, I had an overwhelming feeling of being welcomed. She drove me two blocks away to the sandwich shop where she parked and we went inside. The lunch rush was just ending

and we were able to find a clean table to talk quietly. After I explained the study to Mrs. C. and she had signed the Informed Consent form, we began the study.

### **The Child**

As a child, Mrs. C. remembered that she always felt loved. “At every point during my childhood there was a lot of support.” She lived with her father, mother and siblings. Being the oldest of four children, Mrs. C. remembered more of the hard times than any of her siblings. She sighed, “I remember the fighting. My siblings don’t. I was old enough to remember the throwing of things.” Even though things began to be tough, Mrs. C. stated, “I always felt loved and I never felt threatened at all. I did not come from that type of environment.” Remembering her life as a child, Mrs. C. reflected on her life by the grade she was in when a certain situation happened. “I don’t know why or the reason I remember my life by grades but I do,” she laughed.

As a child, her family moved multiple times in order to regroup. “I was born in Houston and started to school in Houston and there was some dysfunction with my parents so separation occurred quite frequently.” With her family structured with just a year and a few months between each of the children, her mother and father had their work cut out for them. “They were just trying to make everything work. It was hard. It came out in that frustration.” With the frustration that reared its nasty head frequently, separation occurred often between her mother and father. “My mom would get on a bus and we would have to come up here to Palestine and we would come and stay with my grandparents. We would all stay there together.” Even though the separations were bad, having a place to come while surrounded by loving people helped lessen the effects of the

dysfunction. “We lived with my grandparents for a long time. In an old house. I have good memories of that. I look back and I think, we did not have a thing but I never realized it.”

When the family came to live with her grandparents, Mrs. C. had chores on the family farm. With a chuckle, she remembered, “I had to go out and pull goat weeds out of the corn fields and shuck corn, milk cows and that is how we ate. That is what we did. Those were good days.” Mrs. C. related her experiences of living with her grandparents to what her students are currently living through. She said, “It is kind of like what I see now where grandparents have all the kids in the house with them.” Living in the house with her parents, grandparents and siblings, there was barely room to move and the house was old. “There were holes in the floor and now, they would come and condemn that house that we were living in. I think back. I think now, CPS (Child Protective Services) would have been called. There were so many around us like that so it was like where would you start?”

With living experiences so tough, and the constant moving around, Mrs. C. began to have gaps in her learning. “I went to 10 different schools during my education. I went to several in Houston but most of them were right in Anderson county. I mean I went to Cayuga, Westwood, Frankston, and Naches. I think I passed through it 3 times on my way to live with family. So I am one of those kids too that was very mobile.” With a glint in her eyes, Mrs. C. remembered, “I was a quiet child and I had problems making friends you know. Then there were gaps in my learning. I remember my multiplication facts. I missed when they were teaching that and I had to teach myself and being very

embarrassed because everybody else knew them and I didn't. So I had to compensate a lot for the lack of learning due to all the moving around. I remember having some very key teachers through my elementary grade years especially when I would come through the Neches school that were helpful." With the help of these key teachers, Mrs. C. was able to catch up with her classmates and also in some cases surpass them. "They really tried to help me and I didn't realize it at the time but they would pull me over and tutor me and try and get me caught up because of all the moving around. They got me excited about books and just learning in general."

### **The Teen**

Staying true to her remembering her life by the grade she was in during the experience, Mrs. C. reflected, "During my freshmen year, we were living in Frankston. My parents, I feel, were trying to get on their feet and my dad had gotten some land and we had a Jim Walter's home."

As a turning point in her life, Mrs. C. felt things would be better. She was beginning to gain confidence and began to obtain a bit of direction. "We were doing well in Frankston. I had friends. I was a cheerleader. It was kind of like I was finally going. I was getting to this place where I was going to truly start blossoming. Thanks to all the help I had through the years."

Tragedy would find the family again. "My mom had gotten a job and she had started to work and I could tell my parents were happy and things were going good. The very first day my mom went to work, our house burned down. The new one. The water heater exploded and burned the whole house down." The family lost everything! "I

remember being picked up from school that day and I remember her telling us, us driving out there and nothing being there but ashes.” This was devastating to the young lady who was just about to come into her own. Mrs. C. remembered her room and the things that she had accumulated there. With a wistful look, Mrs. C said, “As a freshman girl that has all of your little things that are so important to you. I still see them in my mind. All those things that were so important to me were gone. All gone.”

The family moved back in with Mrs. C.’s grandparents yet again. This meant leaving the friends in Frankston and moving back to Neches school. Her grandparents had moved into a smaller mobile home at this time so there was far less room for the whole family. “We were all crammed into the home and that was very stressful because now you have a 14 years old, 12, 11, however old we were. We were all right there. We were all teen, preteen ages. We were living with our grandparents and trying to make ends meet.”

Times were hard for the family but shortly after their house burned, the community stepped in to help. She reflected, “The thing that I remember about that was how people helped us. I remember people raising money, businesses giving us things.” Even though people helped and the community came together to meet their material needs, Mrs. C. still experienced hard times, emotionally. “That was when I had to suffer my last move. That was the most painful one. The pain of leaving Frankston where I had finally made friends. I had finally felt like I was coming into my own and I had to move.”

The pain of losing her home, school and friends was something of a hardship for Mrs. C. but she was able to survive it because of the support from her family and teachers. "Looking back, it was a wonderful thing. I loved finishing out my years in Neches and that is where God put people in my path that were the most instrumental of who I am today. My parents all along the way, loved me and encouraged me but they had only a high school education and that was it." Her parents were consumed with making ends meet and did not discuss the possibility of her attending college with her at all. "I remember my mom saying 'I hope you find a good man who can take care of you.'" This was the most that her parents hoped for her and she hoped for herself until she was influenced by teachers who began to discuss the possibility of her attending college in the future.

Paying tribute to the many teachers who made a difference in her life, Mrs. C. began to reflect upon the teachers who influenced her into becoming the person she is today. "Mrs. Phillips is my first hero. She took me under her wing. She saw in me a gift and taught me how to express my thoughts. She started working with me and carried me and staying on me. I started going to UIL competitions and I went to state one year and got 5<sup>th</sup> in state in writing. That was because of her. I would have never done it. I found a way to express myself through my writing."

Her next hero was her homemaking teacher who exposed her to Future Homemakers of America. Mrs. C. reflected upon how this teacher was able to influence her to be the best. "Being a leader. She talked to me about running for an office. The next year, she had me running for office at the district level. Before it was all said and

done, I was the officer that got to go on my first plane ride. Members of the school board paid for me to go because I couldn't afford it. I got to go to the national FHA convention. That was a true turning point because I was a little girl. I had never seen anything like that. The whole world opened up to me." Having this type of experience, she began to dream. She dreamed of becoming a fashion designer. I was really dreaming at this point."

Teachers began to encourage her to attend college and her sights were set on majoring in fashion merchandising until she encountered a history teacher by the name of Mr. Holcomb. "He became very instrumental and encouraging in my life at that time. We went to church with him and he would say 'You need to go into education and become a teacher.' I said fine, I will become a teacher. They [the teachers] started talking to me about that and started planting those seeds. All of those people, before I left high school, they endorsed me and helped me to dream and imagine something my parents were unable to help me with because they didn't know themselves.

### **The Adult**

With college on her radar, Mrs. C. knew she would be attending but had no real plan of how she would pay for it. "I didn't know how. I knew I was going to get there. I was working hard. I graduated valedictorian. I got scholarship money there. They helped me connect with Rotary and things to get more scholarship money.

I started going to school." During her freshman year at college, she made the decision to become a teacher. "I got married when I was in college. My husband then became the next one. He too came from a home of poverty. He was never encouraged to

do anything. He and I just connected. So we kind of grew up together. We got married at 20. We kept encouraging each other.”

Becoming a teacher in Neches, where she grew up and graduated, she was content to work and help her students just like the teachers helped her. “Through that time other people would encourage me. Mr. Holcomb came back into my life and he was the one that encouraged me to become a teacher now he began talking to me about getting my master’s. So some of those same people, through time, God brought me back to those people,” she smiled. The help that she has always needed has always been right in front of her the whole time. An epiphany hit her. “Now that I think back, God always brought me to Neches, to be encouraged. Whatever the next big thing he wanted me to do, now that I am thinking about it, He brought me back to Neches.” She reflected. “Through that time other people would encourage me. Mr. Holcomb came back into my life and he was the one that encouraged me to become a teacher. Now, he began talking to me about getting my master’s.” The influence of Mr. Holcomb was great! He was, at this time, the superintendent of schools, and she became a principal at the elementary in Neches. “We then moved off to go down south and I had come back for a wedding and saw Mr. Holcomb and again we were talking and he said, ‘when are you getting your superintendent certification?’ I said, ‘I am not getting my superintendent certification.’”

The influence continued to be great because Mrs. C. decided to go back to school for her superintendent’s certificate. “These people are giants and I get to sit on their shoulders. They saw something in me that I would have never saw in myself and they knew where I came from but they still saw something. They planted that seed and God

kind of nourished it in me until I would be like ‘ok, I wasn’t really thinking that but ok.’”

These seeds continued to grow. After she obtained the superintendent certification, Mrs. C. did not expect to receive a superintendent job. “The reason I am superintendent here is because of my husband. We had to move back here because our parents were aging and we needed to take care of them. So we needed to get closer to them and he said you’ve always followed me for my jobs, this time I feel that you need to be a superintendent. I said how am I, a lady in East Texas, going to be a superintendent?”

With the encouragement of her husband, Mrs. C. applied and received her first superintendent position. As a superintendent, Mrs. C. used her experiences growing up in poverty to relate to the students and what they are going through. She explained that when she hears about one of her students who have lost their home to a fire, she feels a connection because it happened to her while she was growing up. “I immediately have this connection with them and I know what they are going through. I watch how everybody comes together and how they all rush to them to bring them clothes and I think I had the opportunity to (crying) experience that. I know what they feel like.”

Having the experience of growing up in poverty also affords Mrs. C. the opportunity to help her students. “Through my teaching career especially, I can recognize when kids were suffering through things like that because I could see those signs. I know what it looks like when students tried to hide that. I can pick up on it. That experience has enabled me to have an eye for that. I know how to help without offending. There is a fine line there. Even though you are in poverty, you are still proud. You don’t want people to know, especially as a child.” Having an eye for the signs that a

student is in need of help, gives the female superintendent from poverty the advantage that is needed to help each student from poverty.

### **Summary**

Mrs. C. was born in Houston and was the oldest of four children. In her home, dysfunction was an everyday occurrence. Her mother and father separated often and they moved frequently. As a child, Mrs. C. felt supported and loved. After a major fight, her mother left her father and moved in with her grandparents in Naches. Living in a house with her siblings, parents and grandparents was a hard thing to live through but there were many times where ends did not meet. Mrs. C. was a self-professed farm girl who had chores after school. Being a high mobility student, she began to have gaps in her learning and had to work hard to catch up to the other students. Mrs. C. had hardworking teachers who worked hard to help her catch up on basic facts such as multiplication facts.

As a teen, Mrs. C. began to feel that she belonged until her brand new home burned to the ground after a hot water heater exploded. She was devastated because she found herself back in with her grandparents back in Naches. In reflection, Mrs. C. was able to see that this was the best thing that had happened to her because she was blessed to meet and be encouraged by teachers who would soon become her heroes. Mrs. Phillips was a teacher who sparked a love for reading and another teacher who introduced her to FHA. The final hero who had a substantial influence on her was Mr. Holcomb who served as the history teacher who encouraged her to become a teacher. He was also the principal who encouraged her to obtain her master's degree and become a principal

too and he was the superintendent who encouraged her to go back and work for her superintendent certification.

After completing her superintendent certification and moving back to East Texas to be closer to aging parents, Mrs. C.'s husband encouraged her to apply for a superintendent position. With doubt and trepidation, she consented and applied for the position and succeeded in getting it. After obtaining the position of superintendent, Mrs. C. could use her experiences to help the children she served. The experiences that she lived through were helpful in helping her relate to the lives of her students. The experience of her home burning down when she was a teen helps her to know and understand how her students feels if it happens to them. Each experience she has had gave her the ability to see and recognize the signs of a child in need. Mrs. C. uses this gift as a way to help her students who try to hide the situation from sight. She added, "I am so glad that I got to experience what I got to experience because it is who I am."

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **Mrs. “L.”**

#### **Introduction**

Mrs. L. was chosen as my last participant in this study. I contacted her and left my name and number with her secretary. I waited a week and had no answer and decided to get in touch with her again. I called and talked with her secretary and left my name and number again. Mrs. L. called me back the same evening to set up a time to meet with her to conduct the interview. I set about preparing everything for the morning of the interview.

With my bags packed and fresh batteries in my digital recorder, I set off to meet my last and final participant. It was about an hour drive and I had my choice of different routes to take. I could go from city to city or I could take the scenic backroads. With true excitement, I chose the latter. As I had done with all the other interviews, I used the driving time to review the process in which I would start the interview but I could not disconnect completely because the road that I chose to travel was very busy and my full attention was needed. I arrived at the school a full fifteen minutes ahead of the scheduled time. I checked my bag for the third and final time and stepped out of my car and walked to the building.

I stepped into the waiting room of the Administrative offices and approached the secretary's desk. She looked up and smiled. "Hello! How may I help you?" she said. I asked to speak the superintendent and she said, "Please have a seat. I will let her know you are here." I sat down on a chair that was along the wall that led to the front door. It was obvious that the room served many purposes. The line of chairs sat across from a 'u' shaped table that served as the bench for school board members during a meeting. The secretary's desk sat to the left of the bench and just outside the superintendent's door. There were many other doors that ran off the main room such as the business manager's office. I did not sit for very long before the superintendent's door was opened and the superintendent stepped into the room. She was meeting with another woman and they stood and talked for a minute longer and then parted ways.

The secretary left her desk to inform her of who I was and she turned to greet me warmly. "Hello, Mrs. Johnson! I am so glad you were able to come. We will meet in my office for our meeting." As I stepped into her office, I thanked her for the opportunity to work with her on this project. She said, "No, it is my pleasure." Sitting everything down on the table, I set about organizing all the things that I would need to conduct the interview. After taking out and handing her the informed consent form, I launched into my message. She signed it and handed it back to me and I gave her a copy for her own files. With all formalities and pleasantries completed, she began to tell me her lived experiences and how she was able to elevate herself out of poverty.

## The Child

Mrs. L. was a child born into a loving home where her mother stayed home until the children were five and her father worked as a truck driver. "Well, when I was growing up, my father drove a truck so he did not make a whole lot of money. My mother stayed home with us until we were about five years old." Times were hard for the young family too but love was an abundant emotion felt by all the children. Being the oldest of three, Mrs. L. remembered her mother fondly. "My mother got pregnant in her final year in college with my brother and I. She quit college. She had 18 hours left to get her teaching degree. She was pregnant with twins and she quit school so she could take care of us," she said with a smile. "My mom has been a paraprofessional for 35 years. She never went back. She tried going back and they told her that she would have to start all over so she decided not to go back. She just said that she was not going to do that."

Holding the family together was not an easy task for her mother and father. Money was scarce and frivolous spending was not allowed. "We did not have a lot of things but we had what we needed. We did not have over and beyond. We had a roof over our heads. There was food on the table and we had all the love we needed." Mrs. L. reflected on her family and the support she received from them. She stated, "Our family, even though we did not have all the material things, they encouraged us to do better than they had done. All my life they had always said that."

With the support she received from her parents and grandparents, Mrs. L. was free to dream of her future. "I can remember as a young child always wanting to be a teacher. Always. I played school with my brother and sister. That is all I ever wanted to do was

be a teacher. That was from a young age.” She dreamed of teaching so much that she was anxious to spend time in her grandfather’s classroom in Palestine. “My grandfather was a biology teacher in Palestine for 43 years and on spring break, ours would be different, I would go with him. I loved sitting in his classroom.”

As Mrs. L. dreamed of her future, her mother and father continued to work hard to provide for the family. Mrs. L. stated, “They did not have the savings. They did not have the 401K. They were making sure that we had the things that we needed. The life things that we needed, food, clothing, shelter.” As a child, Mrs. L. was provided the necessities of life as well as the emotional support she needed at the times she needed them the most.

### **The Teen**

The emotional support continued throughout the teen years in Mrs. L.’s life. As time passed, her mother began working as a paraprofessional in a local school. Mrs. L. became a teen. The luxuries in life were still limited but the emotional support or what she called the intangibles, were still given by her mother, father and grandparents.

They continued to help her through the hard times. “So, I will never forget that when I was in Jr. High, my dad lost his job and I was going to have to go on free lunch. That to me was devastating. I was like what do you mean we have to be on free lunch? So my mom explained. That was the most embarrassing. You know, we had always been able to take our lunch to school. We had those things and mom said ‘y’all are going on free lunch.’ I was like wow! Being in Jr. High, that was like a stigma.” With this setback, the support of her family increased. “My mom, dad and grandparents kept

encouraging me. You can do whatever you set your mind to do.” She believed what she believed what she was told and held onto it until the hardest times of her life had past.

With a glint of pride in her eyes, she squared her shoulders, sat up straight in her chair and said, “So we got over that little hump and things got back to normal as far as we knew. Dad got a job. Mom was working and we were able to get things again. Nothing extravagant. I didn’t have all the nice shoes that everyone else had. I could not get the Gloria Vanderbilt jeans everyone else was wearing. The name brands that everyone was wearing in Jr. High. We didn’t have those things but we had the intangibles things. Those are the things that made me who I am today.” Having the support meant the world to Mrs. L. and it provided her with the strength and fearlessness to walk into her future. She began to work at an early age and never looked back. “In high school, I started working at 16. I started working at a restaurant in Nacogdoches. I worked my way through college.”

### **The Adult**

With her future well in hand, Mrs. L. continued to work her way through college. “I worked my way through college. I worked hard to get my bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies and I went to teaching.” Before finishing college, she met, fell in love and married her husband. Together they worked to build a family and their future. “He worked and so did I. We made the bills. We had a roof over our heads and food on the table.” Mrs. L. loved her family and she loved teaching but she continued to dream. “I was saying that I think one day I want to be principal and so actually I had my twins

who are twenty now. I was about 5 years into teaching and I just decided you know what, there is more for me and so I went back and got my principal certification.”

After securing admission into the principal program. Mrs. L. realized the amount of responsibility she had assigned herself was huge. Not only was she a student again but she was also a teacher, wife and a parent to two rambunctious twins. “My twins were three and thank God for my husband because he helped because two at one time. It was difficult to handle two at one time. He helped with that and then I went right on in and got my superintendent certification.”

Even though her plate was full, she decided nothing would stop her from achieving her goals. She had earned her superintendent certification when there were few females seeking the certification. “I think it was that encouragement and being a female there were not that many females in the superintendent cohort.”

Times were hard but in a different way. Mrs. L. felt the sting of being a female in a male dominated career. “I can remember those courses, it was during research, we had a research partner and I was the only female in the class. My research partner is a great friend of mine. The professor assigned us a research paper and we turned in the same paper. I wanted to make sure that it was done right. So, I did ask a lot of clarifying questions where males don’t do so, quite as often as females. I don’t know if that was a factor or not.” With grit and tenacity that helped Mrs. L. achieve her life goals, she tapped into the same when applying for superintendent positions. “I had applied for several superintendent job before I got this job. I was in the final in two and then received this one.”

With her current role being her first position, Mrs. L. is learning so much more about herself and how to become a great leader. “Just be true to yourself. For me is being me. What you see is what you get. If that is what you want.” With tears in her eyes, she explained, “I am passionate and that is how I show I care. If I am passionate about something, I will show emotion. They thought of that as a weakness. There are times in places that I think you should show your emotions. It is okay to show your emotion. For me and I have told many people in many conversations, what you see is what you get. This is me. I am authentic. I am going to be upfront. If that is what you want, then I am the person for the job.” Mrs. L. credits knowing yourself and knowing where you fit in the puzzle. “You know, I have gone into interviews and I’ve left there and have thought, ‘Oooh, I hope those people don’t call me back’ because it was not a good vibe. It was not a good fit.”

As a female superintendent from poverty, Mrs. L. believes that she must serve all students in her community in the best way possible. “I think what we have to do as women is be role models. Here we have 60% of our students identified as being from poverty to show them yes, they can. Especially in the rural areas. Give them some experiences that may not get anywhere else coming from poverty.”

### **Summary**

Beginning life in poverty with a supportive mother, father and grandparents afforded Mrs. L. the ability to dream of a better future. She set about making her dreams come true. She began working at the age of 16 and continues to work for her family and

the students in her school because she believes that as a role model it is her responsibility to give her poverty students the experiences she did not have to help improve their future.

Mrs. L. was my last and final participant who identified herself as having survived situational poverty. She met with me at her district's office and welcomed me into her school. And was eager to share her story. Mrs. L. as a child enjoyed having a stay at home mother for her and her siblings. She spoke with respect when discussing her mother and her grandfather.

Mrs. L. spoke of the support that she received during the hard times in her life. Her support system consisted of her mother, father and grandparents. As a child, she wanted to be a teacher and would teach her brother and sister in her bedroom. She idolized her grandfather because he too was a teacher.

Mrs. L identified an incident that was traumatizing to her and she knew, at that point, that they were living below the poverty line. As a teen, Mrs. L.'s father lost his job and was notified by her mother that they would not be able to take their lunch to school but would have to eat the cafeteria food and be on the free lunch program. As Mrs. L. reflected, she explained how humiliating that felt. Reflecting back on her lived experiences, Mrs. L. explained that she did not want her students to go through the same things that she did and made strides to be accessible for each of her students to ask questions about college, career or even life.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **Narrative Analysis of Nonfiction**

#### **Introduction**

In this narrative nonfiction study, the researcher evaluated the lived experiences of three female superintendents from poverty and how they were able to elevate out of poverty to go on to lead their current districts. The problem addressed by this study was that superintendents who grew up in poverty have the first-hand, personal experiences necessary to understand the negative influence of poverty on students who are living in poverty.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the emerging themes and similarities of the lived experiences of the three female superintendents from poverty. Within the lived experiences of each female superintendent are the raw emotions of fear, anger, embarrassment, awkwardness and frustration as each move through the stages of development in their lives. The organization of this chapter is broken down into six themes that were common across all three lived experiences. A narrative analysis is presented, organized into the life stages of the child, the teen and the adult from poverty was used.

The first part of this chapter presents the findings after the evaluation of each female superintendent's information, which was received through interviews of each participant who was able to choose what information she wanted to divulge. The information used in this study was derived from an interview protocol that consisted of a single open-ended question (see Appendix C). The single open-ended question was used to guide the participant to where to start her story but the questions that followed were only clarifying questions to help the researcher clarify a point that was presented by the participant. Each participant was contacted and interviewed in the same manner. It was the choice of each participant, where the interview would be conducted and her choice of what information would be given. All interviews were digitally recorded using an Olympus digital voice recorder (VN-7200). The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim in an effort to become familiar with each participant's lived experiences.

Each participant was chosen because of the commonalities of their backgrounds in poverty, gender and their current career choice. Each of the participants is unique in their lived experiences from their own perspectives.

The paragraphs that follow outline the background of each participant and their districts. The size of the district and the district status of economically disadvantaged students for each participant was also provided, however, in an effort to protect the identities of each participant and uphold the guidelines described in the Internal Review Board (IRB) protocol, the names of each participant and her district was changed and replaced with a pseudonym.

**Dr. R.**

Dr. R. was the first participant selected for this study. I met and interviewed her at her home. She leads a district that serves over 1900 students. This district is 80% economically disadvantaged. She was born into poverty and was raised by her grandparents after her mother and father divorced. She lived through generational poverty. She was raised on a farm but did not know that she lived in poverty until she was an adult. Being raised by her older grandmother, who valued education, was an asset for her. She was taught much of the basic things such as letters and numbers before she was old enough to attend school. She received a head start before it was a popular program and catch phrase as it is today. Her grandparents did not finish school but the value that her grandmother placed on education is seen in her life today. After completing her bachelor's degree, she was encouraged by friends and professors to complete her master's degree and then her doctorate. Today, her focus continues to be on helping others, whether they are young or old, men or women, in poverty or out to become successful in life.

**Mrs. C.**

Mrs. C. was the second female superintendent that I interviewed. I met and interviewed her at a public sandwich shop. She leads a district that serves more than 3,300 students and has more than 60% of their students claiming economically disadvantaged status. She was born in Houston and began school in the Houston area. She lived through generational poverty. Her family was very dysfunctional and moved numerous times. She and her family moved to East Texas to live with her grandparents

on a farm where she had daily chores as well as school responsibilities. They continued to move from school to school in the area. Her learning began to show gaps but through the diligence of hardworking teachers, she was able to bounce back and graduate as Valedictorian of her graduating class. After being encouraged by teachers and administrators, she decided to obtain her bachelor's degree and then her master's degree. She served as a teacher, principal and superintendent of area schools. She continues to put her students first in every aspect of her leadership.

### **Mrs. L.**

Mrs. L. was the third and final female superintendent that I interviewed for this study. I met and interviewed her at her office in the Administration building of her school. She leads a small district that serves 250 students and 59% of her student body claims economically disadvantaged status. She was born and grew up in Nacogdoches, Texas. She lived with her mother, father, sister and brother. Her mother had some college experience but held no degree. Her poverty was situational and lasted only a short while. Her and her family lived on the edge of poverty and was thrown into poverty because her father lost his job. She knew she wanted to become a teacher at an early age. She was influenced by her grandfather and the respect she saw given to him by his students. She succeeded in achieving her bachelor's degree and master's degree and currently works to help students from poverty attend college or pick careers.

### **Presenting the Findings**

The three female superintendents were chosen for their gender, economic status they grew up in and their current career choice for this study. Their lived experiences are

organized chronologically into the child, the teen and the adult. This organization retells their lived experiences at different stages of their development. With each of their experiences with poverty being different, they all held commonalities that are discussed in this section. Ryan and Bernard (2000) expressed that finding themes in the lived experiences of the participants is the most essential task in a qualitative study.

To find these commonalities or themes across the lived experiences of the female superintendents, I transcribed all the interviews. I read and re-read the transcripts from the interviews several times, uploaded the transcripts into NVivo 11. In this program, the transcribed information was uploaded and coded into nodes. The nodes or categories were attitudes, awards, clothing, family, food, home life, lack of knowledge, mindset, relationships, religion, school activities, school experiences and turning points. Each node was chosen because of the information received from each participant's lived experiences. I read through each participant's story and organized each sentence into the node that it talked about.

As I read through each participant's story, common themes began to emerge. The common themes that emerged were education and attitude of family members, positive relationships with key people, school experiences, lack of knowledge, religion, and how each female superintendent currently use their past experiences to help them relate to their students today. All participants were asked the same question of what are the lived experiences of a female superintendent from poverty that enabled them to elevate out to lead their current districts.

### **Family members.**

Each participant began by telling the story of their family and the situations they lived through. All three participants had contact with their mother and father while growing up but were sincerely influenced by their grandparents in some way. This contact was beneficial in the development of each participant during a pivotal point in their lives.

As a child living in poverty, the education and attitude of family member play an important role in their lives. Dr. R. expressed gratitude for the upbringing that she received at the hands of her grandmother. Living with her grandmother and being influence the “old school” way of doing things, gave Dr. R. the foundation that she needed to be able to reach her goals. Mrs. C. lived on and off with her grandparents but discussed the feeling of safety she experienced when living in the house with them. Mrs. L. admired her grandfather and would often visit his classroom just to sit and watch the interaction between him and his students. While Mrs. C. and Mrs. L. had extensive everyday contact with both mother and father, Dr. R. was brought up solely by her grandfather and grandmother.

As a child, the three female superintendents expressed, with the abundance of love given by the family, they did not realize that they were living in poverty. With the amount of fresh vegetables provided to the community by Dr. R’s. grandparents, she thought they were rich despite the fact that they did not have a car and had to call a relative to take them to the store. Mrs. C. did not know they were living in poverty because there were many families in the town that lived exactly like they did. Mrs. L.

expressed that as a child her living arrangements were not the best with holes in the floor but with the support of her family, she had a great life.

In the early years, the life of all three female superintendents were shaped by the voices of the family members around them. Each lived experience was different but had a hint of commonality about the three. For all three female superintendents, the voices of people around them spoke life to their person. Mrs. L. stated that her grandmother would tell her to ‘be sweet and be somebody’ which gave her the love she needed to go out and work hard because she had a goal to accomplish. Mrs. C. and Mrs. L. expressed the support that was given by their parents during times of stress.

Living in generational poverty, Dr. R.’s and Mrs. C.’s parents did not have formal education past high school. Dr. R.’s grandparents did not reach high school at all but Mrs. C.’s parents did graduate high school. Living in periodic situational poverty, Mrs. L.’s mother had some college experiences.

As teens, the influence of family members continued for all three female superintendents. For Dr. R., the influence of her grandmother continued. She spoke more of her grandmother at this point than her grandfather because it was her grandmother who provided total care for her during this time. Mrs. C. spoke of her father more because of the hardships that were happening during this time. Mrs. L. spoke of her mother being a big influence in her life at this point. Dr. R.’s reflected how the voices of family members affects her even today. The voice of her grandmother keeps the vision of the future fresh in her mind. It is a constant quest to ‘be somebody’. She also

experienced the negative voice that told her that she would turn out just like her mother and father.

As adults in reflection, each female superintendent expressed that she would not be the person she was if she had not gone through those experiences in her life. Dr. R., Mrs. C., and Mrs. L. all used the experiences that they lived through with family to not only become the best superintendent they could be but the best person they could. Mrs. L. expressed that looking back over the incidents that happened in her life, she would not have made it out with the support of her mother, father and grandparents.

Without the support of at least one positive family member who the female superintendent was in constant contact, she may have not be able to elevate out of poverty to go on to be who she is today. With the background of each female superintendent's family members, they may have just continued on the track provided for them. For Dr. R., the destination was being a high school dropout and teen mom. For Mrs. C., becoming a high school graduate looking for a man who could take care of her and the family. Mrs. L., the life of a discouraged college student living one catastrophic incident from poverty. With positive family members who always spoke joy, love and kindness to the child and the teen living in poverty, each female superintendent was able to elevate to their current position as an adult from poverty.

### **Positive relationships.**

Positive relationships with key people were the underlining theme with all three female superintendents from poverty. They all expressed that there was at least one key person who encouraged them during each stage of development in their lives.

As a child, all three participants identified at least one positive relationship with a key person who helped them to see a new way of doing things in life. Dr. R.'s relationship in childhood was that of her grandmother who provided the foundation for her life. Mrs. C.'s positive relationship was a teacher who saw the gaps in her learning and began to tutor her until she was able to catch up to the other students. Mrs. L.'s positive relationship was with her mother who encouraged her to be better than her.

As teens growing up in poverty, the three female superintendents had experiences that shaped them as the people they are today. The female superintendents pointed to the love and care of certain individuals who helped to influence them in life and a turning point happened because of the influence of these educators. Dr. R.'s grandmother continued to encourage her but she also indicated that a teacher who introduced her to ideas that were never thought about in her household. Mrs. C.'s teachers continued to tutor her and help her to discover the hardworking, young woman that lived inside of her. Mrs. L.'s support system that she called her family was ever present and would spring into action when they were needed.

As adult from poverty, the female superintendents expressed gratitude for the people who provided the love and understanding that was needed at that time in their lives. Looking back upon their lived experiences, each participant provided an account of the people who helped them to realize that how they began life did not dictate where they would go in life. The influence of these educators was the driving force behind each female superintendent getting in education. Mrs. C. identified a relationship with her teacher, who encouraged her to become a teacher. He then became the principal who

encouraged her to become a principal and finally he was the superintendent who encouraged her to become a superintendent. All three participants spoke of each positive relationship with respect and pride. Mrs. C. expressed that she stands on the shoulders of these giants, daily.

Without the existence of positive relationships in the lives of each female superintendent from poverty, life would have been extremely different. The educators who influenced the vision of the participants were so profound that they changed the trajectory of their lives and started them on the path out of poverty. They were able to pass on the passion for teaching tomorrow's child strategies that can be used today.

### **School experiences.**

School experiences was another underlining theme that stretched between the lived experiences of each female superintendents from poverty. As a child living in poverty Dr. R., Mrs. C. and Mrs. L. had a plethora of stories to tell about their experiences at school. Dr. R.'s centered around home life and how it affected her at school. The fact that she did not have indoor plumbing until 4<sup>th</sup> grade affected how she was received at school. She recited a story that discussed the fact that her grandmother used only talcum powder as deodorant on her and as a result was teased at school. Mrs. C. discussed the effect of dysfunction of her family and the constant moving they were forced to live through created gaps in her learning that were embarrassing for her.

As each female progressed into their teen years, the knowledge that they were different from others began to be more pronounced. Dr. R. continued to be teased by her classmates until it boiled over into a fight. The knowledge that she was not like others

was blaringly evident in the clothes that she wore. Her grandmother made all of her outfits with extremely old fabric that fell apart with one tug from a classmate. Mrs. C. expressed that with a move to Frankston ISD, she was able to come out of her shell and began to make friends and involve herself in school functions. Mrs. L. pointed to an incident that happened shortly after her father lost his job where they were told that they would have to go on the free lunch program. She felt embarrassed and was only helped through the embarrassment by her mother who also worked at her school. As adults, each of the female superintendents reflected on each event that occurred in her life and expressed that each event shaped her into the people who are able to identify students who are going through some of the same things they lived through in their lives.

### **Lack of knowledge.**

The lack of knowledge of family members were an experience that was shared by Dr. R. and Mrs. C. Mrs. L. did not give a story that demonstrated the lack of knowledge that were shown by her or her family members. The grandparents of Dr. R. were of advanced age by the time they received her from her parents. Having only a grade school education, they were not schooled in the art of taking care of an infant. Mrs. C. discussed stories that expressed the lack of knowledge that was perpetuated by the quest to survive from day to day. As a child, Mrs. C. experienced the fights between her mother and father, which were mainly about money.

As teens, Dr. R. and Mrs. C. experienced the lack of knowledge that was evident all around them. Dr. R.'s quest to attend college was met with the lack of knowledge of her grandmother, father, and mother. When she asked about college, she did not have

anyone to explain the process. Mrs. C.'s parents did not talk to her about college as teen. She was told to find a good man and let him take care of her.

Reflectively, Dr. R. and Mrs. C. discussed the fact that without the knowledge of what to do to go to college, they were close to living up to the expectations given to them by family and friends. Without the encouragement from the positive relationships with key people, they would have quit and tried something else. Both made it their priority to discuss college in their own household and with students at school. Dr R. said that she made it a priority with the counselors at every school to provide every student with college applications even if they did not fill them out. At home, both female superintendents expressed that they stressed the importance of obtaining a college degree with their children.

Through positive relationships with people who encouraged Dr. R. and Mrs. C. to push for more in their life, both overcame the lack of knowledge that seem to proliferate around them. Starting life in the confines of generational poverty, they were able to, through hard work and diligence, elevate themselves out.

### **Religion.**

The importance of religion was discussed by all three female superintendents from poverty. It was obvious that religion plays a major role in the lives of each female superintendent. Dr. R. discussed the use of a mule and wagon by her grandfather to transport them to church, no one else discussed religion during the child stages of life. All three female superintendents began to express the participation in the teen years. They discussed their participation in activities put on by the church.

As adults, each superintendent reflectively discussed that without the help of God, there was no way out of poverty. All three women credit the teachings in their church as the foundation they needed. Dr. R. expressed that without God, she would not have what she has now. Mrs. C. explained that life would be different if she did not have her faith. Mrs. L. emphasized that without the love of God, she would not be who she was today.

Religion was a theme that each female superintendent discussed with passion and dedication. They all showed reverence to their faith and illustrated that without God being in their life during some of the hard years, they would not be the people they are today.

### **Helping the students.**

As adults who have survived the ravishes of poverty, the three female superintendents reflectively discussed the attitudes they hold toward the students in their district. As superintendent of a district, the superintendent must serve the needs of all students in order to have a successful district. The female superintendents from poverty who lead a district that has a high population of economically disadvantaged students has unique insight into how a student from poverty feels, how they learn and how to interact with those students, to pull out the best in them. Each female superintendent gave their unique perspective on how they use their experiences to help their economically disadvantaged students. Dr. R. stated that she knows where her students are coming from when they boast and brag about not attending school. She switches her hat from superintendent to ‘I am your momma’ hat to quickly get control of the students and

convince them that they are only hurting themselves. Mrs. C. explained that when she sees an announcement of a house burning down in her district, she quickly searches for the name of the students to see if it has affected a student in her district. She added that by doing this, she can get help to the family quicker. Mrs. L. expressed that she understands her role as superintendent for students who live in poverty and takes measures to be visible and accessible for the students.

Helping students through the ravishes of poverty is something each one of the female superintendents discussed in their interviews. Dr. R. is so passionate about helping others that she has earned a second doctorate in divinity and is just wanting to help others. Mrs. C. looks for opportunities to help her students and Mrs. L. provides each and every student with the opportunity to question her about college or life issues. She believes that with the job of superintendent of school comes the responsibility of being the example students can look to become all they were meant to become.

### **Summary**

Researchers have explored the lack female superintendents promoted to lead school districts in the state of Texas. Researchers have also explored the effects of poverty upon the students in today's schools but few have linked female superintendents and poverty to study the effects and how they were able to elevate out of poverty. As a female, from poverty aspiring to become a superintendent, the shared similar experiences provide me with a source of encouragement. Seeing the experiences and hearing the stories told by these three female superintendents, have infused me with hope and understanding that anything is possible. I feel as if a door has been open and a new

destination has been plotted. The themes that extend across the lived experiences of each female superintendent is very similar to my own experiences. All three female superintendents expressed the presence of family, positive relationships and school experiences as what has shaped them into being the people they are today. They all expressed the importance of religion as a way in which they were able to live through much of the experiences. They all expressed a willingness to help others like them to elevate out of poverty.

Chapter VII provided an analysis of narratives that were concluded based on the data derived from the interviews of the female superintendents from poverty. This chapter reported the common themes such as education and attitude of family members, positive relationship with key people, school experiences, lack of knowledge, religion and how they use their experiences of growing up in poverty to identify and help the students in their district who currently live in poverty.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **Summary, Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the summary of the study, conclusions, implications, recommendations for future research, recommendations beyond research and concluding remarks. In the summary of the study, the research provides an overview of the problem, the problem statement, research question, study design, data collection, data analysis and a summary of the study's major finds. In the conclusions section of this chapter, the researcher provides an analysis, synthesis and evaluation of her findings as well as stating her opinion about the findings. The next section presents a discussion of implications of the study. The researcher discusses who will benefit from the study, what they will learn and how it might impact practice. In the next two sections, the researcher offers recommendations for future research and beyond. In the final section for this chapter, the researcher provides concluding remarks that highlights the main points in the chapter and synthesizes my comments.

#### **Summary of the Study**

As an African American female from poverty who aspires to become a superintendent in the future, this study was of interest to me. The purpose of this study

was to examine the lived experiences and leadership practices of female superintendents that came from a life of poverty to understand how they were able to overcome a life in poverty to address the needs of students who live in poverty within boundaries of their school district. With poverty affecting 9.5 million families in the United States, those families have children who are attending public schools every day. The problem addressed by this study was that superintendents who did not grow up in poverty lack the first-hand personal experience necessary to understanding the negative influence of poverty on students who are living in poverty. The female superintendent who did grow up in poverty can provide leadership that understands the situations that the student from poverty face every day and recognize problems that exist that are not being addressed and provide the help that is needed.

In this study, the researcher used narrative non-fiction method to obtain the information needed. The researcher interviewed three female superintendents who self-identified as being from poverty. Each participant was asked to tell her story as a response to the following research question.

1. After transitioning through the stages of life, what are the lived experiences of female superintendents from poverty that enabled them to elevate out of poverty to lead a district with a majority of students living in poverty?

Allowing each female superintendent to tell her story was important. Utilizing the narrative non-fiction study method, the researcher was able to re-tell the female superintendent's story of the lived experiences in her life and how she was able to elevate out of a life of poverty to lead her current district. The researcher allowed the

participants to tell her story and only asked clarifying questions about the information provided by her in the first interview. After the participant's responses were recorded, each was transcribed by the researcher in an effort to become intimately familiar with the narratives. After the transcription was complete, the information was uploaded into the NVivo 11 program to be organized and analyzed. In the NVivo 11 program, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts and organized the information in nodes or categories. Those categories consisted of information from what the female superintendent provided in the interviews.

The nodes created in the NVivo 11 program were attitudes, awards, clothing, family, food, home life, lack of knowledge, mindset, relationships, religion, school activities, school experiences and turning points. In each node, the research sorted the transcribed interview, line by line. Commonalities and themes began to emerge. The themes were school experiences, grandparent influence, religion, relationships of key people and how they use their experiences of growing up in poverty to identify and help the students in their district who currently live in poverty.

When each female superintendent discussed school experiences, they were able to pin point a story and discuss how they felt when it happening indicating a lasting impact on their lives. Each female superintendent discussed the role their grandparents played in their upbringing. All three female superintendent discussed the influence of religion in their lives and the fact that they may not have made it out if it was not for God. All three female superintendents identified key people who influenced their decision to attend college and become teachers.

## Conclusions

Many conclusions can be drawn from the information provided and received depending on the viewpoint of the researcher. The following conclusions were drawn after each participant's lived experiences were analyzed by the researcher. Each conclusion is supported by the literature located in the literature review.

The role that education and attitude of family members of children are significant in the development of the child in poverty. Mani et al. (2013) explained that lower levels of education can cause increased misunderstandings of contractual terms and less parental guidance which many influence next generational parenting styles. This conclusion was discovered after the analysis of the information because the researcher discovered that Mrs. R.'s grandparents had very little education and she struggled with many aspects derived from this lack of education. She stated that no one discussed college with her. Mrs. C.'s parents graduated high school but did not discuss college with her. Mrs. L.'s parents did have some college experience and she stated that she always knew that she would go to college to become a teacher. The lack of education held by parents/guardian directly affects the student living in poverty. Marquis-Hobbs (2014) indicated that middle-class and upper-middle class families discuss college with their children but poverty parents do not.

Positive relationships with key people are helpful in order to encourage the student from poverty to reach higher and dream bigger. Since teachers spend a large amount of time with students daily, they can foster the concept of resiliency (Marapodi, 2001). All three female superintendents identified at least one person who made a

difference in their life at different stages. All three female superintendents indicated that these key relationships happened at key development points in their lives and provided a turning point for them to dream bigger for a better future. The conclusion drawn from this theme is that students rely on people around them to mold them into the people they will become in the future. Swanson (2011) identified school counselors as just one of many school employees that can provide support the student living in poverty. The more positive relationships that a student living in poverty has, the better they are but there is not a magical number that has to be reached in order to help a student out of poverty. For some students it might only take one person but for others, it may take more than one.

School experiences lived by the female superintendent helped them to navigate through life. Each participant discussed the many lived experiences that occurred while at school. With each student spending more time at school than at home, it stands to reason that students will be affected by what happens within the walls of public education. The conclusion that I draw from this theme is that the experiences that the students have at schools across the state of Texas have an enormous impact on the person they will become in the future. Pollard-Durodola (2003) pointed out that special attention must be given to increase school experiences for the student living in poverty.

Religion is a key theme that stretches across all accounts. The use of religion to remain focused on goals was a key aspect for every female superintendent. Banjerjee et al. (2009) explained that women living in poverty rely on religion as a way to meet and exceed the pressures of everyday life. Each female superintendent discussed the use of religion to help her remain focused in her upbringing and throughout her life. The

conclusion drawn from this theme is that providing the student with faith is instrumental in the development of a child living in poverty. Schieman (2011) pointed out that families living in poverty use religion to make major decisions in their lives.

All three female superintendents identified experiences that helped them develop as an educator and superintendent. Connecting with just the student is the first step and helps but Hill et al. (2016) proposed that forging a relationship with the parents will deepen the connection with the student. The participants identified experiences they used when relating to parents, students and staff in an effort to create the meaningful relationships that last. They also identified events in time when they had to use past experiences to identify students living in poverty. The conclusion drawn from this theme is that a superintendent who has lived through the ravishes of poverty can provide programs that target at risk students to increase their success. The superintendent as the leader of schools has the power to create programs that involve all stakeholders and increase the success of all students (Cawelti, 1999).

### **Implications**

As an African American female growing up out of poverty, who aspires to become a superintendent in the future, the conclusions from this study helped me to know and understand how others like myself were able to elevate out of poverty. This study focused on the lived experiences of female superintendents from poverty and how they were able to elevate themselves out to help the students in their district. The lived experiences of these female superintendents provided insight into how, in the future, schools can address the growing numbers of students in poverty.

Drawing from the previous conclusions, there are three salient points discussed in this section. Family, key relationships and religion are the three main areas that provide support for a student living in poverty. These three salient points provided the foundation needed by the three female superintendents during pivotal points in their lives. The presence of positive voices from family members enabled the female superintendent to tackle the tough times in life. Along with the positive voices of family members, each female superintendent from poverty also identified the presence of a positive relationship with an educator who provided them with a vision to hope for a better future. Religion provided the student with not only belief in God but the hope that He will provide a better future for them.

### **Implementations for the superintendent preparation programs.**

Chase (1995) expressed that some female superintendents are expected to adopt traditional roles of leadership while other female superintendents defy convention to develop their own leadership styles. Superintendent preparation programs can provide training to aspiring superintendents on cultural issues such as poverty to increase awareness of students living in poverty and how to help them. O'Brien (2014) pointed to education of all stakeholders in cultural competency, diversity and leadership training as a way to increase awareness of students living in poverty. This will aid the female superintendent to become aware of the effects of poverty on the students in her district and allow her the opportunity to change her leadership style to aid the student living in poverty.

The participants in this study have expressed how they used their lived experiences to identify and help students living in poverty. By providing the experience of culture awareness training in the superintendent program, the University can establish an addition experience for the aspiring superintendents to draw from to help the students who are living in poverty with her future school district and increases the awareness of poverty.

### **Implementations for parents/ guardians.**

Kirby and Fraser (1997) identified caring, supportive parents/ guardian as an important ingredient to a successful future for the student living in poverty. Parents/ guardians must seek programs that can help their child to seek a better future through education or the career field. Parents must understand that opportunities are available through their child's school or local programs in their city to aid the student to be successful in the future.

Two of the participants in this study expressed that their parents did not discuss college with them as they grew up but the participant who went through situational poverty reflected that her parents discussed college with her on a regular basis. By the very nature of the parent expressing the opportunity of going to college or finding a good paying job allows the student living in poverty to hope for a better future.

### **Implementations for school policy.**

Davis (2005) explained that children from poverty have decreased access to basic resources thus putting them at-risk for mental health issues and delayed developmental skills. Schools should employ or make available social workers who can provide the

student with necessary resources to decrease the risk of mental health issues that befall the student living in poverty. School policy should attack the issue of poverty at an early age by enacting programs during the early years of development to help build a solid foundation for the student such as mentoring, and academic help programs.

All three female superintendents identified a trusted individual who provided them with the support that they needed during pivotal points in their life as a child. Schools can reduce the effects of poverty on the child later in life by providing this support early. The National Center for Children or NCC (2014) pointed out to poverty as the biggest threat to a child's well-being.

### **Implementations for living in poverty.**

Nettles, Mucherah and Jones (2000) established that being born into poverty does not dictate the person future success as an adult. Students who seek opportunities to be free from the bonds of poverty must seek to explore opportunities that are available through school's programs. Students must embrace the help that is provided by teachers, counselors, administrators and parents to chart a path to success. By embracing and accepting the support offered by the school, the student can increase their chances for success. Students must also seek available support from peers and community groups such as churches that can help them identify with peers that share their goals and beliefs. Caugherty (2016) explained that providing the students with useful ways in which to deal with adversity will aid the student to cope with hardships in life.

The participants in this study identified support systems that were available to them when they were advancing through life. All three female superintendents identified

grandparents who were instrumental in their success. They all also identified at least one educator who provided them with the support they needed to hope for a better future. All three female superintendents also identified religion as a source of support for them during some of the toughest times in their lives. Students born into poverty can forge a better adult life for themselves through hard work and determination.

### **Recommendations for future research**

Recommendations for future research are important and are based on the findings in this study. The recommendations are:

1. Conduct research on female superintendents from poverty by a male researcher to get the male perspective on the effects of poverty on the female superintendent.
2. Conduct research on college preparation programs that target females that are labeled economically disadvantaged.
3. Conduct research on male superintendents from poverty to explore any similarities or differences that may exist across gender lines.
4. Conduct research on novice female superintendents from poverty to explore their views on how they plan on serving the population of student living in poverty.
5. Conduct research on schools that directly target teachers and school administrators to work with their disadvantaged students and the results stemming from this work.
6. Conduct research on the female superintendent from poverty who has retired from the public school system to ascertain the affect she had on population of students living in poverty during the time she was superintendent.

7. Conduct research utilizing quantitative method to produce information on the number of superintendents in the state of Texas who identify as having grown up in poverty and types of districts they serve.

### **Recommendations beyond research**

The researcher recommends studies that can be done beyond research. The researcher recommends the following recommendations:

1. Superintendents should require their administrators and teachers to develop programs that allow parents the opportunity to attend classes on college and career preparation for students who are identified as “at-risk”.
2. Superintendents should require teachers to track all at-risk students and provide each student with numerous opportunities to experience different types of social and academic excursions that will broaden their horizons.
3. University preparation program should provide opportunities for parents to earn certifications for employment through their child’s school.
4. Superintendents should increase the awareness of the positive effects of establishing key relationships with the students and parents.
5. Teacher education programs, Principal Preparation programs and Superintendent Programs should include a cultural awareness component that require college students to immerse themselves in a day in the life of a poverty student.
6. Teacher education programs should include a class on teaching students how to identify, approach and help their future at-risk students in their time of need.

7. Texas Education Agency should create a database of resources that are updated monthly or yearly that provides the teacher with on demand, relevant help for the at-risk student.
8. The superintendent of schools should require secondary campus administrators to create a real life simulation fair where local businesses and community members are invited to participate and the student is encouraged to make real life decisions without real life consequences.

### **Closing Remarks**

This study has afforded me the opportunity to explore three things that are close to my heart. They are

1. being a female leader in the male dominated position of superintendent;
2. becoming an effective superintendent in the state of Texas; and
3. working with and inspiring students living in poverty on how to come out of poverty.

This process has allowed me to reflect upon my past as a child, a teen and an adult from poverty. It has also allowed me to connect with people and to learn from their experiences of living in poverty. It also provided me with how they were able to overcome many of the restrictions that were placed on their life. The connections that were made with these three women were amazing. Their willingness to help with this process was amazing. Each of them conveyed the feeling that they wanted to focus on helping girls and women to move forward in the field of their choice. Not only females from poverty but also every student under their care. The give and take of information

and the ease in which the women accepted me into their offices was astounding.

Watching their faces as they reflected back upon their life, allowed me a glimpse in to the private life of such public figures. All three superintendents were moved to tears when discussing their students and the circumstances they see happening in their lives. This is an indication to me that each of them are in the position not as a figure head but as a person who truly cares for the lives of their students.

Listening, transcribing and interacting with the lived experiences of each of these female superintendents from poverty afforded me the ability to reflect upon my own lived experiences and to dream for my future. I have always been a person who watches the lives of others and I learn from their mistakes and utilize their success in my own life. Being a person who has grown up in poverty, I had discovered that the only limits that can hurt your future is you own view of the world. Poverty affects many students everyday but those effects can be minimized by the attitude and beliefs of others. I had a conversation with a co-worker about people living in poverty. He walked up and he said, “This morning I was getting dressed for work and I began to be thankful for the many things that I am blessed with.” I said, “Good! It is good to start your morning in a thankful mood.” He said, “I am thankful for a heated house, lights, running water and food on demand. I just think about all the people in the third world countries who do not have even the barest of luxuries and I do.” With me working on this study and being intimate with the stories of these three female superintendents who grew up in the wealthiest country in the world, I could not help but to think about the students in my own district who do not have indoor water such as Dr. R. who went until 4<sup>th</sup> grade before

they got indoor plumbing. I could not help but to think about Mrs. C. whose house burned down and had to move in with her grandparents and her father had to burn wood inside the house to keep his kids warm. I even thought about Mrs. L. whose father lost his job and the family had to go on free lunch so that their children could eat. I expressed to my co-worker that I understood what he was saying but poverty does not only exist in the third world countries anymore but right here at our doorsteps and in our schools. The students who walk around us every day, leave our school not knowing where they will sleep or what they will eat. More educators must know and understand the lives of these students and encourage them to set goals and work toward reaching those goals. Poverty is not only in the third world countries, it is right here in Texas and growing.

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## **APPENDIX A**

## Welcome Letter to Participants

Date:

Dear Ms. / Mrs. / Dr. XXXXXX

You are invited to take part in a research study conducted by Stephanie L. Johnson from Palestine, TX and a student at Stephen F. Austin State University. The purpose of the study is to research the lived experiences of three female superintendents who grew up in poverty and analyze the relationships that enabled them to change. The study will take place in Texas only.

Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the study. Your participation is voluntary. There is no compensation for participating in this study. There is the minimal risk of psychological stress and if you feel stressed, you may stop at any time. Your participation in this study will contribute to establishing my theory that education alone cannot bring students out of poverty. Students must have quality relationships.

The researcher will not use your information for any purposes beyond the degree requirements and will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher's name is Stephanie L. Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at 903-922-2406 or sjohnson8197@gmail.com. The researcher's faculty advisor is Dr. Pauline Sampson advisor/chair/faculty member and she can be reached at sampsonp@sfasu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can contact me, my advisor or Stephen F. Austin State University at 936-468-2908.

Any concerns with this research may be addressed to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Stephen F. Austin State University at 936.468.6606.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to participate in the survey questionnaire and study.

Printed Name of

Participant

---

Participant's Written or

Electronic\* Signature

---

Researcher's Written or

Electronic\* Signature

---

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an “electronic signature” can be the person’s typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

I look forward to working with you on this study.

Sincerely,

Stephanie L. Johnson

## **APPENDIX B**

**Participant Informed Consent Form**

I have read the letter and understand the purpose of this study. I have read the requirements of participation in this study, and I agree to participate in this research. I understand that I will remain anonymous in the reporting of the study and that my responses will be kept confidential. I realize that I may withdraw at any time and that my participation is voluntary.

Any concerns with this research may be addressed to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Stephen F. Austin State University at 936.468.2908.

---

Signature of the Researcher   Date

Signature of the Participant   Date

Stephanie L. Johnson  
102 Brierwood Drive  
Palestine, TX 75801  
903-922-2406

Dr. Pauline Sampson - Dissertation Chair  
Stephen F. Austin State University  
P.O. Box 13018  
Nacogdoches, TX 75962  
936-468-5496

## **APPENDIX C**

## **Interview Questions**

The following questions are used to guide the interview process.

### **Interview #1**

1. After transitioning through the stages of life, what are the lived experiences of female superintendents from poverty that enabled them to elevate out of poverty to lead a district with a majority of students living in poverty?

### **Interview #2**

Questions will be dependent upon the responses from interview #1.

1. The last time we met you discussed events in your life that happened to you. Are there any stories that you told that you would like to expound upon at this time?
2. Will you tell me more about your childhood, teen years or adult life while living in poverty?

### **Interview #3**

Question will be dependent upon the responses from interviews #1 and #2.

1. The last two times we spoke, you discussed events that happened in your life. Would you like to expound on any of the events you shared with me?

## VITA

Stephanie Punch Johnson attended The University of Texas at Tyler, and received her Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies in 2001. She started her teaching career at Westwood Middle School, where she served as 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Science teacher, middle school basketball coach and High School tennis coach. In 2002, she coached volleyball and basketball at Jacksonville Jr. High. Stephanie accepted a position at Palestine Independent School District at Story Elementary. She was moved to the Jr. High to teach P.E. and Coach Jr. High volleyball, basketball and track until 2010, when she accepted the Head Girls' Volleyball at Grapeland High School from 2010-2012. At this time, she returned to start her Master of Education degree at Stephen F. Austin State University. In 2012, Stephanie returned to Palestine Jr. High to coach and teach 8<sup>th</sup> grade science. She was again moved to the Palestine High School where she became Assistant Principal in 2015 and was selected into Cohort 18 at Stephen F. Austin State University to earn her Doctorate Degree in Educational Leadership. She currently serves as Assistant Principal at Palestine Independent School at the High School level.

Permanent Address: 102 Brierwood Drive, Palestine, TX 75801

Style manual designation: Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Fifth Edition

Typist: Stephanie Punch Johnson